

Living Portraits

My mother died on a Wednesday afternoon in June. That Saturday, I was back at work, shooting a wedding. When my father died three months later, in September, it was a Monday evening. That gave me five full days before I returned to the happiest day of someone else's life.

The absurdity isn't lost on me. My job as a wedding photographer is documenting joy. I capture the happiest moments: proposals, engagements, births, weddings. At work I am constantly exposed to the most joyous moments of a person's life. At home, I was dealing with the very worst- the unimaginable. 2017 was the hardest year of my life; a high bar considering the several extremely challenging years prior.

Mom had originally battled lung cancer, and she had been given a clean bill of health. But it returned, like cancer does, as a rare cancer. It was in her spinal fluid and there was no real treatment. We were suddenly thrust into a new world, a world where there were limited answers, limited support, and limited funding. Then Mom was accepted as a patient at Memorial Sloan Kettering and we had something new: hope. There was a clinical trial she was a match for. We went from thinking we had a matter of weeks to realizing we might have years.

Cancer takes control away from you completely (or rather, it reveals to you that you never had control to begin with). The same year my mother's cancer diagnosis turned terminal, my sister decided to start our Cycle for Survival team; the indoor cycling events are part of a national effort in which every dollar raised funds rare cancer research. We felt that our Cycle for Survival team, The Fuller Flyers, was making a difference, and contributing directly to the same trials that were keeping Mom alive. Riding gave all of us some of that control back.

But cancer is cruel. Last February we rode with Cycle for Survival in support of my mother. She was alive and battling hard, but we were well aware that she likely wouldn't be around the next time we rode, in 2018. My father wasn't sick. He was fine; he was her caretaker. A couple months after our ride, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Mom died in June, at age 62, on Dad's 66th birthday. He died three short months later in September.

I used to think my job wasn't that important. Being a wedding photographer isn't curing diseases or anything noble like that. This past year, when I was balancing my weekday photo editing schedule with full-time care for my parents, there were moments I couldn't believe I hadn't abandoned my job to dedicate more time to them. But the week my mother died, my sister's wedding photos, and my wedding photos, became a huge source of comfort for us. We had all these moments, perfectly preserved, showing a time when we were happy and together. Photos matter. I had realized just how much.

I also used to think that a camera was just for preserving moments of joy. But a friend convinced me to pull out my camera in some of our darkest moments this year, and, as painful as these photos are to look at, they also tell the true story of grief. My life this year wasn't just wedding vows and champagne toasts. It was medications, surgeries, hospice, cremation arrangements, and memorial services. It wasn't pretty and perfect – far from it. But I think it was worth documenting.

There were a number of people surprised by my ability to return to work almost immediately following the death of each of my parents. But in my mind, there was no doubt: I needed to capture these same moments of joy for others. It hasn't been easy to watch mothers and daughters hug and kiss and gush over each other; to watch families laugh together, cry together, dance together. Sometimes I've had to step away and wipe back tears. Sometimes I've been overwhelmed with anger and the unfairness of it all. But overall I've been honored to be there to preserve forever these moments of happiness for others.

After watching my mother die, and then my father, I started re-reading the Harry Potter series to try to deal with the immense and overwhelming grief. In the wizarding world, photographs are able to move, speak, and interact to a degree. I'd never thought much about them before, but now they seem wildly significant in a story in which the loss of parents is such a prevalent theme.

These living portraits manifest a photo's ability to remind us not just of a single moment, but the entire context of that moment and the people in it, and by extension, they keep people alive in our memories after they have died. The photos' literal movement in Harry Potter illustrates what our minds do figuratively when we see a photo in the real world, but in a deeper sense, this metaphor realizes the true power of photography. It brings to life the most distant historical events and the most intimate personal moments alike, allowing us to experience more vividly the times we want to relive and the people we want to remember.

There aren't many sources of comfort when both your parents are taken from you by rare cancers when you are 30 years old. Cycle for Survival has been a wonderful support system; every person who joins our team, every donation, every post about fundraising helps immensely. The community that Cycle for Survival has connected me with has shown me that I'm far from alone, and provided a sense of purpose for my grief.

The other major comfort has been photographs. Photos leave us with a physical reminder of the joys in someone's life. At the end, it's easy to forget how happy a life was, especially for our family – my parents died before their time, of horrible diseases. But we have so many photographs of the past where they are smiling and joyful. They were so in love. They were so happy together. And we had blissful years of life and love and no worries at all, where they are on family trips, or sitting on their porch, or watching their daughters get married.

After the horrible experiences of the past year, I now know how important my job is. I'm thankful for the honor of documenting moments of love and joy for people- even when my life is dark and full of sorrow. I also believe that someday we'll have happy family photos again. It may not be soon; grief is a long and never-ending road. But I know there is joy worth documenting in our futures, and I'll be ready for it.