

Skating Toward Healing

How ice-skating helped a daughter get an edge over her grief.

By Amy Paturel

My first Christmas without my father, I tried to make merry with my three children. We baked candy cane cookies, delivered poinsettias to our neighbors, and sang “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” with the sort of gusto only school-age kids can muster.

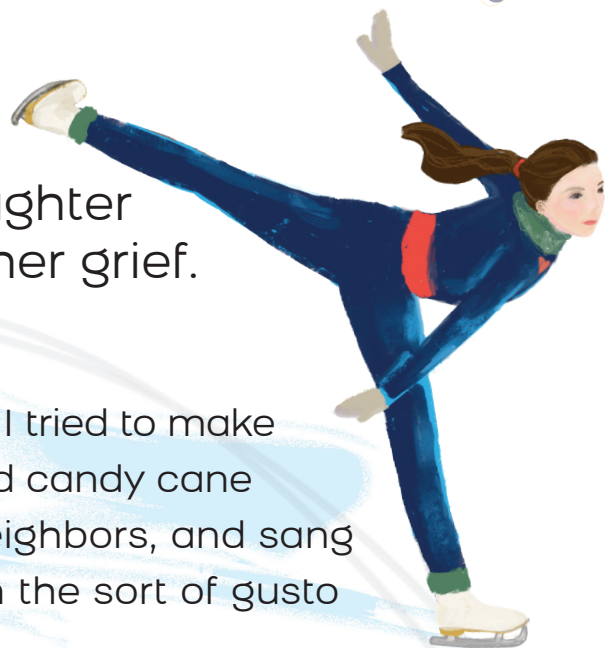
Through it all, my grief was so heavy I struggled to go through the motions for our family. But when I stepped into the rink for our holiday ice-skating tradition, I felt a lightness, a respite from the crippling sludge of sadness. My blades cut through the ice. Wind rushed through my hair. And for a fleeting moment, something magical happened: I felt closer to my dad.

According to Helen Marlo, Ph.D., chair of the clinical psychology department at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California, there’s a neuropsychological reason for this connection. Engaging in hobbies and activities you enjoyed as a kid with your parent brings grief to the surface. So it turns out skating was helping me process the unfathomable loss of my dad.

When I was 6 years old, I told my parents I wanted to be a figure skater. “Are you sure?” my mom asked. I had already tried ballet, gymnastics, and even long-distance running alongside my dad.

“I’m sure,” I replied, picturing myself twirling through the air in a sequined skating dress.

Between ice skates, private lessons, and 5 a.m. ice times, the cost of my hobby nearly broke my parents. While they both indulged my passion, my dad took on the role of chauffeur. He woke me up, packed my skates, gloves, and a chalky Carnation breakfast bar, and drove me to the rink without complaint.



“You did great today, kiddo!” he would say, as he helped me pack up after a solid practice. On days when I spent more time on my rear than on my blades, Dad commented on my tight, fast spins, not my flubbed double jumps.

I quit skating at age 12 or 13 when cheerleading uniforms and pep rallies became more appealing than figure eights and competitions. Moments after winning my first gold, I told my coach I was done.

“Well, at least you went out on a high note,” Dad said, patting me on the back as we left the rink.

Rink Redux

Over the next 30 years, I’d only been skating twice—once at an outdoor rink in Yosemite in 2003 and the second, the day after Christmas in 2017, when my children first put on ice skates for what would become our annual ice-skating tradition.

During that second foray on the ice, I broke away from my boys and began skating, really skating, around the rink. Even with ill-fitting skates and dull blades, I felt an inexplicable freedom when the cold air hit my face. I skated back toward my boys and shaved ice onto their boots as I skidded to a clumsy stop.

“Wow, Mom, you’re good!” they said, begging me to take another spin.



I yearned to get back to that feeling of freedom, to achieve a sort of weightlessness that would free me from grief. Maybe revisiting my childhood passion would help me connect with my younger self, the young girl who had a loving father.

So the week after our family visit to the rink in the following holiday season, the same year my dad died, I bought myself a pair of skates. Sure, I was in my mid-40s with three elementary school-age children. But I set aside the money and told myself it was a Christmas gift from my father. I even wrapped up my new skates in a box and put them under the tree.

It didn't matter that my dad never bought our gifts, or that brand-new skates felt like a luxury we couldn't afford. That symbolic act served as a permission slip to get back to the ice—a way to channel my dad's signature optimism and tireless pursuit of happiness. According to Notre Dame de Namur's Marlo, my seemingly frivolous purchase makes sense.

"When we're trying to process grief or trauma, our brains often shut down because it's painful," she explains. "We turn to sensory and physical experiences because putting our loss into words, or thinking about it cognitively, is too much for an already overtaxed brain to process."

Relief for Grief

The next time I hit the rink, I realized it wasn't like riding a bike. Everything didn't instantly come back to me. I was unsteady on my blades, I forgot the lingo, and yes, I fell on my bottom. The following day, my thighs and backside were so sore it hurt just to get out of bed.

On top of a raw bum and a bruised ego, I felt guilty and self-indulgent at every turn. I had a hard time justifying the cost of ice time knowing we had three kids to put through college. But I also knew that getting back to the ice was somehow healing. And my husband, Brandon, saw that too.

"Have fun," he said, kissing my cheek. "Just don't break a bone."

So I set my guilt aside and hired a coach, Vicky, to help prevent Brandon's worst nightmares from coming true. I was dismayed that my limbs weren't as bendy as they used to be and that I couldn't twirl through the air like Tinker Bell and land on my feet.

"You'll get it back," Vicky said with the patience and understanding of a woman who had skated in similar boots. "Your muscles and mind just need a little push."

Within minutes of working with her, I was performing mohawks, bunny hops, and figure eights. Before the end of our first session, I was beginning to spin. My body seemed to miraculously remember.

Research out of Norway shows that the information-packed cells inside your muscles remain, even when your muscles atrophy. The earlier in life your muscles encode the information, the better equipped they are to retain that memory. So when you work those same muscles in the same way again—even 15 years down the line—your muscles know what to do.

This so-called "procedural memory" has a double-whammy-like effect. It can also activate pathways associated with memory formation. So not only do your muscles remember, but so does the rest of you. Getting back to ice-skating, a physical source of joy from childhood, almost made me feel whole again. It felt, in a way, like coming home.

"Behavior can be a form of memory," Marlo says. "It can reconnect you to powerful feelings, experiences, and relationships. It's tangible, something concrete you can achieve that makes you feel good. And that can be compensatory and healing, especially in the face of loss."

Now when I visit the rink, I can feel myself moving through my grief, both honoring my dad and healing myself simultaneously. My body may ache. I may feel cold and off-balance. But my ice skates act as a sort of time machine that provides my heart and soul with sweet relief. I'll never be the skater I was when I won that first competition—and then quit—but I can still hold on to that childlike experience of pure bliss and enjoy taking a spin. 🍷