



Italy vs. Holland

Imagine you spent your whole life dreaming about and planning a trip to Italy. As a child you got the idea that you wanted to visit Italy and you could never get it out of your mind. As you got older you bought travel books and imagined yourself sitting in Italy eating fresh pasta and drinking fabulous wine. You added travel DVD's to your travel books so you could more easily imagine yourself in the different cities and driving through the Italian countryside. Eventually you even enrolled in a conversational Italian class so that you could speak with people when you finally did get to Italy. And during all these years you saved every extra dollar you had for this dream trip.

Finally, the day came for you to go to Italy. You had spent years dreaming of this vacation and the last several months planning it. You had packed and repacked your suitcases and were finally on the airplane. You could barely contain your excitement. The whole flight you thought about what your first day in Italy would be like – after all – you had it planned to the minute!

As the plane landed the flight attendant shocked you beyond belief when she did not welcome you to Italy but instead said, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Holland.”

You wondered how this could be! No one else seemed disturbed by this news but you were heart broken. You were sure that Holland was a perfectly fine country and had lots of wonderful sights to see, but you wanted to go to Italy. Not only did you want to go, you had spent your whole life dreaming and planning of going to Italy. How could you possibly be happy in Holland?

You may be wondering what this story has to do with caregiving. Actually it has a lot to do with caregiving. Almost all of us have a picture of how our lives are “supposed” to go, almost a script for our lives. We may plan our professional and/or personal lives step by step, or we may have a particular period of our life that we script; such as retirement. Then something happens that completely alters our script. We lose a job, our marriage ends, or a parent or spouse needs caregiving. We have just gone from Italy to Holland. It happens to almost all of us at least once in our lives.

The question then becomes: Can we learn to appreciate the “Holland” in our lives and let go of our fixation with “Italy”? The extent to which we are able to do so determines our level of enjoyment and peace of mind.

My Father provided me a stellar example of someone who made this type of transition with grace and dignity. When my Mother had a massive stroke at an early age, retirement, as they had known it ended abruptly. There were no more trips, playing cards with friends, or hikes through the North Carolina mountains. My Mother was severely disabled and my Father immediately became a devoted caregiver. For the first year after her stroke she was in a nursing home for rehabilitation. My Father never missed a single day visiting her and encouraging her on her slow road to improvement.



Talk about ending up in Holland rather than Italy! When I would tell my Father how proud I was of him and what a remarkable job he did as a caregiver he would always say, “This is just what people do in these situations.” It is true many people do just what my Father did. And then we all know others who can never let go of what might have been.

It is perfectly normal to grieve for what we have lost. The key is how long we let that go on. We get to choose how long we let that grief rule our lives...how long we keep wishing we would be in Rome. The longer we spend lamenting our situation and wishing it was different the more likely we are to miss the splendor of Amsterdam’s tulips! That is the danger of hanging on to a dream that has changed...we miss the joy and the beauty of the new experience...of the moment we are in RIGHT NOW! You may not have chosen your caregiving situation and you may wish it were different from what it is. The question I have for you is this, what gifts are being offered to you in this current experience, this experience you didn’t choose? Discover that and you will find that you, too, can be as happy in Holland as you thought you’d be in Italy!

Dr. Amy