

On “Being” for the Widowed

“Widowed.” I looked at the paper and realized there was something after “Single,” “Married,” and “Divorced.” I hadn’t gotten that far before, but now it is the box I am asked to mark. I pause and think about all that it means. Days...and then weeks and months of changes. Context changes from “we” to “me.” Shifting from sweetly delegating with a smile and, “Would you mind...?” to doing. Figuring out resources to make things happen, figuring out finances for one, figuring out ways to pass the endless hours. Deciding without considering what my lifetime “partner in crime” would think was best or most fun. Hah, that word “fun.” Whatever happened to that word? I haven’t used it in ages. Why did we ever disagree on anything, I wonder? What a waste of precious time! Why didn’t we hold hands more? I would give anything now to feel those fingers comfortably wrapping around my hand. And I so miss that gentle snoring next to me half the night. Why did I ever complain? I had no idea how silent and long the hours without the snoring would be. “Widowed.” That single word carries so much inference. It hardly seems possible to fit all that meaning and ages of time into two simple syllables.

“Living on.” It’s a phrase I much prefer to “recovery,” or “getting over it,” or “surviving.” Even “resilience” alludes to an exhausting volume of energy being poured out. At first I was enduring, but with a little time I’m coming to think of myself as “persistent.” Semantics. I don’t feel like I’m making real progress, but I’m not shrinking away either, at least for this moment. I might call it, “continuing.” As Winston Churchill said, “If you’re going through hell, keep going.” But I am so incredibly lonely. I wake up, often after a restless night. Usually then, although not always, I actually get up, I follow my simple little survival routine of making the bed, brushing my teeth, showering, and dressing. Sometimes I have coffee or breakfast, and I try to read something. It hits me again that death has wiped out my complete past, my existing identity, and stolen my entire future, *our* future. I feel the anger rising again. Then I remind myself that yesterday I decided to face whatever there was to face, and I decide that again today. A short time ago, the argument in my head went back and forth for a while...there is no future for me anymore, but time marches on, and here I am, already living beyond a few minutes ago, the future of yesterday and of last week. So, it looks like my life goes on whether or not I like it. Even if I’m unable to adjust to it or embrace it, the future is slowly happening. The thought of embracing widowhood repulses me. Yet it might be inevitable. Maybe. Once again, enslaved by logic, I am forced to see the truth of the situation and eventually, I must explore the possibility of accepting that half of the union of “us” is dead. It seems unimaginable. We were supposed to be together almost forever, but at least a little longer.

As the future arrives and time slowly marches on, I spend minutes, hours, and days interrupting my thoughts with other thoughts, memories, wishes, prayers, tears, and my fair share of heartbroken moaning. I had never moaned before. But this profound whole-body flush of despair and loneliness takes me into gulfs and valleys deeper than I had ever experienced or imagined. Even with family and friends at the other end of a telephone call, I feel so alone. There is only one voice I wish to hear, one face I long to see, and if not that one, then I’m ready to go to Heaven and see the only other face I have truly looked forward to seeing. But that seems not to be my destiny. I am stuck here on Earth, given the life I am given, and it appears to be my assignment to make some level of peace with that. Peace. That’s still beyond me. Back to another round of sobs. What if...? If only...! How did this happen? I know how, logically, but really, how? It’s all so impossible. And my brain wanders off into another journey of

contemplation, trying to sort out any potential meaning. I remember Queen Elizabeth II summarizing C.S. Lewis in saying that grief is the price we pay for love. Earl Grollman said that the only cure for grief is to grieve. A widowed acquaintance aptly said, "Cooking for one sucks." On and on my brain searches for a quote with a key to unlock the door between us so we can be together again, but I find none.

Family and friends visit. I am warned they will all need to get back to their own lives eventually. For a while, I am invited to tell my story repeatedly, which helps me sort of process exactly WHAT has happened, even if I'm not yet in the place where I know WHY. One friend suggested that I write down a few things for people to do who ask. "Invite someone to drive you to the store. You'll be surprised at how tired you feel and how grateful you will be to have someone drive you home." "Allow someone to help you do the laundry and you can do some small tasks while the washer is running and have tea while the dryer is going." "Let companions drive for doing errands or tidy a room or prepare some meals. Maybe they can print a couple of menus from favorite restaurants nearby from which you can select takeout meals that can be brought to you by people who would like to offer support. Maybe they will run interference when someone says something idiotic to you." Let others in, my friend suggested, and let them support you in small, useful ways.

That was great advice. I am still close to many of those who reached out. Someone else provided a list of grief groups and classes. After a few months, I selected two; one was a class at a nearby community college and one was a widowed group. I attended the class for all 12 weeks, but in the widowed group, several people widowed for nearly a decade were still attending. Presumably, they were there to help others, but I felt like I wanted to grow OUT of widowhood. I didn't like being widowed and didn't want that to characterize me, even though it was becoming a real part of my identity. So, I went to a couple of those meetings, picked up some helpful written materials, and didn't return. I made a new friend, however. New friendships found in the abyss of new grief sometimes don't last long, and such was the case here. But it was helpful to share our stories for a little over a year. Also, I learned how fortunate I was to have a family that offered support instead of descending upon my home and claiming everything that was my spouse's should be distributed to some relative or friend. It was unbelievably complicated to get support from anyone who would not take sides and perhaps help navigate the intrusions. Families can get very messy around death. One must decide on what seems right and how to respond to hurtful comments without escalating others' emotions when one's own are not at their best. Visiting the cemetery, the beach, a lake, a mountain meadow are welcome diversions that offer moments of calm. Even walking anonymously through a market, city center, or shopping mall where the surroundings are chaotic but not asking anything of me is refreshing. Please, I beg the world, no more decisions for a while. I've made enough decisions. I have chosen to BE for another day. Isn't that enough?

It is said that the death of someone close to you will change your address book. People I thought would "be there" for me have evaporated. Early conversations with them were brief and while sometimes helpful, were mostly neutral to unhelpful. I was told to avoid focusing on these absent relationships. Some may return later, and others will be replaced by people coming from unexpected places to fill their shoes. People I cannot anticipate will show up and show up mightily. People who always seemed to say something helpful. People with nothing to say but will sit with me for hours. People who bring small gifts to cheer me up, who leave something on my doorstep, who offer to accompany me places and be my

escape if I decide early that it's time to leave a gathering, people who help me try new things to see what activities I might be able to enjoy, people who do puzzles with me or sketch things or help me cook or build something, and people who bring their own pets to visit and console me. There are people with skills who have offered to help with something needed, and people who connect to others like someone to buy my now extra car. I thought later I might have asked someone to help me write thank-you notes. There are so, so many people to thank. Really, though, I only know a few. They breezed into my life at the right times to assist with some need and then were gone. It's all a bit of a haze. I can't recall all the individuals, but I know there was help from the grocery store cashier, the mailman, the greeter at church, the Sheriff's office, and the lady at the license bureau. That was an emotional disaster. My license expired because I didn't want to update my marital status on government records. My cousin discovered and took me to a licensing bureau in another county, answered all the questions for me, and shoved me in front of the camera at the appropriate time. I was dazed, yet I will always appreciate the tough love I received that day.

There are others to thank whom I will never meet, people who have compiled resources and checklists to help people who have lost someone they love. The State Patrol and Sheriff's Office have immediate needs listed to provide a sort of checklist to be sure critical steps are addressed. Stephanie Larkin put together both a book and a website called Widowed in Seattle: Local Resources and Information, a thorough and thoughtful compilation. Taylor and McLeod collaborated on Take Heart! and Take Courage! to support men experiencing widowhood. Megan Devine's book, It's OK that You're Not OK takes a deep dive into many facets of grieving. Area hospitals (such as Swedish and Kaiser) and community groups (Grief Companions Project) offer compassionate peer groups on a regular schedule. Even practical help like "FlyLady.net" has helped me get a handle on how to manage household tasks in minutes a day. That's a big help every day. I've also learned not to subscribe to things, just search for them when needed or my e-mail becomes a behemoth I cannot tame. I just don't have the concentration.

Wonderful resources exist to help people navigate this path and most area chaplains can provide at least two or three specific helps for anyone in need. I remain grateful for those who reach out to people like me who have experienced significant life losses and life traumas. Hope is slowly returning. I'm actually looking forward to a couple of upcoming activities.

If you also check the "widowed" box, the future is arriving, and we have a significant place in it. Enter gradually, at your own pace. Be as busy as you'd like to be, and no more than that. Ask for what you need. People will appear and help as they can. Remember there are others all around you who will accompany you if you invite them. They will be glad to meet you and who knows, they might say or do the right thing that helps you continue a little farther on your path and you will come away with one more person for whom to be thankful. Many written resources on a wide variety of topics are available where you found this letter. The words of a mentor still repeat in my head as I develop new skills for living and I wish the reader well as I offer these words to you: "Be ever so kind to yourself."