



A WIDOW SHARES HER THOUGHTS ON THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

The following article is by Elizabeth Bookser Barkley who lost her husband to brain cancer at the age of 52. When Elizabeth's husband died, her life changed dramatically. She writes:

You probably know a widow or widower. According to the 2006 United States census, 13.9 percent of the population falls into this category, with women claiming the bigger share at 11.3 percent. Having turned fifty the year before my husband's death, I knew few people my age who had been down the widowhood road. In the past few years, however, I have more frequently met women and men who have lost a spouse. Each death sucks me back into the quicksand of my own grief. Each death also invites me to reach out to the newly initiated, to "pay forward" the graces I received in the wake of my personal disaster. Each encounter reminds me that although the pain never subsides, there are graces to be had in the journey toward a new wholeness.

Chances are that even if you know people who have lost a spouse, they have never shared the emotional toll that the death has taken on them - either because they don't want to burden you or because their experience defies words.

Recently I sat down with Tom, a friend from work whose wife had died several years earlier following a three-year bout with cancer. Knowing more women than men who were widowed, I was curious as to whether gender altered the experience. By the end of our lunch, I was convinced it did not.

Blindsided

Blindsided is the word that best captures the recurring waves of memories - of love and loss - that widowed friends, including Tom, describe. A month, a year, or a decade after the death, when they should have "gotten over it" and moved on, they find themselves dealing with unexpected tears at a line from a song, the turning leaves on a tree, or an item on the nightly news. For Tom, one surprising emotional blow came five years after his wife's death when he heard one of her favorite songs, the Dream Sequence

from *Oklahoma*, on a date to the theater. Without warning, he began sobbing, the lyrics tugging him into the past. Another friend, who had returned to the city for a memorial ceremony for her husband, was jolted halfway through the five-hour drive back home. Having made the trek often while her husband was alive, she came to the exit on the trip where they'd always changed drivers - and sadly, there was no husband this time to take the wheel.

One of my most memorable hits came a month or so after Scott's death. I melted down in the lingerie aisle of a local department store. How was I to know that looking for a bra would do me in? Without warning, I collapsed under a rack and cried quietly, realizing that it really didn't matter what the bra looked like, since I would be the only one to see it.

The grace of such moments? Empathy. Not everyone has lost a spouse, but many have lost parents, friends, brothers, sisters, or children. One widowed friend told me she was irritated after her husband's death when a sister-in-law told her she knew "exactly" what my friend was going through - probably an absurd claim. **Although I may not be able to know exactly what the mother who has lost a child may be feeling, I can listen to her story, be unembarrassed by her tears, and acknowledge her pain.** And gradually I have become accustomed to, and even embraced, my status as grief magnet for those in our parish who have lost a spouse. No words are necessary when we embrace and cry.

"Hazard yet forward"

Many of the widowed, grappling with their pain just after the death, run headlong into one of the most frightening realities of the spouse's death: starting over. Always a devotee of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, I found inspiration after Scott's death in the motto on the Seton family crest: "Hazard yet forward." And I welcomed yet another grace: embracing "firsts." The first night alone in a now-half-empty bed, the first Christmas, the first family vacation, the first funeral of a friend's spouse, the first major purchase alone, the first wedding of a child, the birth of the first grandchild. Each event brought the same sinking feeling in my stomach, but also a stretching toward new life.

Dating

Tom remembers his first dates after his wife's death. Before she died, they had drawn up two lists: women to date and the "do not call" list. He confided that after her death, he juggled some of the names from list to list. After decades of the right fit with his wife, sharing so much, including children, dating was, he said, "so hard." When he found a woman who confirmed that he could love again and they decided to marry, it was a "big step" to introduce his future new wife to his children and his first wife's family.

For me, the first date was not my idea. A friend of many years decided it was time for me to start circulating, so she arranged a double date with her brother-in-law, a widower whom she described as "a guy who likes to date." Agreeing to the date was the easy part. More challenging was breaking the news to my daughters. On the evening of the date, one of them suddenly realized that when I said I was going out with friends whom she had known for years, that there was a fourth person, a man she didn't know, who happened to have the same last name as my friends.

"You mean you're going out on a date?" she reproached me in tears. "Dad would be so angry!"

Though I explained that her father had urged me to date after his death, this did not sit well with her, a teenager nursing her own loss and grief. It would take more time for her to realize that this "first" for Mom was beyond her control.

However, she and her sisters were intimately involved with other "hazard yet forward" moments. Within a month of Scott's death, we were well into the Christmas season, and I bought tickets to a performance by a local arts high school of my girls' favorite musical, *Annie*. Although I remember little about the show, I do remember the drive to the theater. Outside, the gray skies matched our mood. Inside the car was an energy I can only describe as currents of hot pain and memory generating from each of us, colliding with the pain of the others.

Support of family and friends

As a family now reduced to four, we kept on "hazarding forward." But we would never have made it without the support of our friends and family. Therein lay another grace: the power of community. Years later, a friend and fellow teacher commented on a powerful image she holds of me the week after Scott's death. The day I returned to teach happened to be the day of the monthly faculty meeting. Sitting in

the back of a multi-tiered classroom, she watched as I entered, surrounded by four or five male colleagues. From her vantage point, it was as if they had formed a living shield as I entered, surrounding me with their love, as if to ward off more pain and carry me forward.

None of us would survive widowhood without the protective force of others lifting us out of our sadness and sweeping us along with them into each new day. Tom could not have made it through his wife's cancer and dying without the support of the prayer group she'd urged him to join during her illness. After her death, this same group, his minister, and his friends at church kept him afloat. Another friend counts as essential to her healing "the love and concern of our ChristCare group," couples who were essential to her life before and after her husband's death.

Somehow, my friends and family seemed to know the right times to be there: traveling across town to sit quietly with me at Christmas Eve Mass, unembarrassed as I cried through my favorite carols; making the rounds to neighbors on a dark Thanksgiving night, searching for a wrench to open the kitchen pipes clogged with too many potato peels, then insisting that we capture the moment on film, triumphant wrench in my outstretched hand; treating me to dinner out, when I had little appetite for food, as they dispensed advice about the importance of eating well, exercising, and staying healthy.

With their help, I learned not to anticipate the future, which I could not predict or control, but to live each day fully, what Elizabeth Ann Seton called "the grace of the moment" or "the sacrament of the present moment." Many who have lost someone they love reassess their daily lives, knowing how fragile they are. Since my husband's death, not one day has passed that I do not think of death. This may strike some as morbid, but I see it as healthy, forcing me to treasure relationships, prioritize daily tasks, and let go of minor irritations that in the past would have escalated into confrontations.

Recently a friend, who had lost her mother and brother-in-law within the year, shared her sister's struggle in coping with her unwelcome status as widow. Her sister had challenged her to "just tell me how those friends of yours you always talk about got through this."

She came to town recently, and unfortunately I did not get a chance to talk with her. If I had, I would have admitted that it has not been easy. Sometimes I wanted to curl up in my bed, pull the covers over my head, and shut out the world. But that's not really a choice. **Even**

as I wish daily for the past and realize I will never live out our plan inherent in Browning's lines, "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be," I can't let myself stall out my life with dreams of what should have been or waste emotional and spiritual energy railing against the reality of widowhood.

As my life continues to unfold, I take comfort in the many parallels with Elizabeth Seton's. She was daughter, wife, mother, widow, and religious sister. I embrace her as a model, though my pattern flipped the order of labels, with "religious sister" lining up in my life just after "daughter." Her rich life and deep spirituality are crystallized in these words that continue to anchor me and help me reach out to the growing numbers of widowed persons I encounter: **"Contemplate how you are being asked to give your heart to God amidst your everyday activities. Be prepared to meet your grace in every circumstance of life."**

How to Help Those Grieving the Loss of a Spouse

Bring meals, first checking to see what they need so that you don't add one more chicken casserole to their freezer.

Listen, not just right after a spouse's death, but even months later, when you think they should be "over it."

Remember dates associated with the deceased: his/her birthday, wedding anniversary, date of death. Send cards and e-cards...with a short note.

Call to check in. Even if they're out or have the answering machine on because they don't feel like talking, leave a message of support and love.

Surprise them with seasonal gifts, like the turkey I ordered from a local butcher someone had already paid for or the Christmas tree the parish Boy Scout troop donated to a friend's family after the father's death.

Hug them, if hugs fall into your comfort zone. One of the great losses of the widowed is physical contact with a spouse.

Acknowledge the deceased's absence on special occasions with gestures like offering prayers before a family Thanksgiving dinner.

Visit the gravesite, even on your own. What a surprise for the grieving to find flowers someone else has brought.

Encourage them to stay healthy, especially just after the death when their bodies are worn out from months or years of caregiving and from the physical toll grief takes.

Have fun with them, inviting them to a light play or movie or remembering funny stories from the married couple's life together.

Create permanent memorials, perhaps purchasing a marker in a public spot that welcomes memorials or planting a shrub or tree in the deceased's memory. (End of article)

Some years ago I wrote an article on loss entitled: *"Jesus Wept" - Dealing with the Loss of a Loved One*. Like last week's article on Dealing with Anger in a Constructive Way, this article is very practical. It names 13 challenges to be negotiated when dealing with loss, twelve important things to remember about the grieving process, helpful steps in the grieving process, and signs that healing is occurring.

Have a blessed week,

