

when parting comes

by Ellen Lamar Thomas

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When the ultimate grief comes, and you lose your spouse, will you be ready? And how will you cope? Of all life's stresses, psychologists tell us, it's losing a spouse that demands the most drastic readjustment.

More women than not will face such loss. By the time they reach 60, a quarter will

have already experienced it and the sorrow that follows. And while fewer men than women are left alone, their feelings of loss are often more intense.

So how can you prepare for this trauma? And when it comes, how do you go on?

'Till death us do part.'
Even at its outset,
we're reminded that
every marriage ends.

Have your house in order

Carol, a close friend, was in anguish as she watched her dying husband suffer. He'd asked for 'no heroic measures', but she couldn't find his will. When, years before, he'd urged that they talk over the matter, she'd demurred: 'That's depressing. We have plenty of time.' But where was his will now when there was no time? And what were his investments? She had no idea. Her security was at stake.

Communicate your love

'How can we endure parting with someone we love,' a grief counsellor was asked. 'Love the person well,' was the answer. 'And communicate it while you can.'

Regrets cause deep anguish after the loved one is gone: 'I wish I'd shown more affection', and, 'I cared, but didn't say so,' are the sort of statements you'll want to avoid. 'Never let affection go unspoken,' a sage once said.

Widen your friendships

Do you find most of your happiness comes only from your partner? If so, that's unhealthy. 'The single best predictor of successful grieving,' a researcher observed, 'is a good, strong, human safety net. Those left with slight support are likely to remain mired in their grief. Those with strong support are able to mourn their loss and become whole again.'

How broad and how strong is your support system? Deliberately seek new acquaintances if you don't already have them. Deliberately cultivate friendships outside of your marriage, because you'll need them one day.

Develop outside interests

To be seaworthy in life's storms, grief counsellors advise, put out anchor lines of interests and hobbies. 'Their value,' observes Dr William Menninger, a psychologist, 'increases greatly during periods of stress.'

When losses come, our interests can become our lifelines, diverting our thoughts, helping us fill the void and strengthening our safety net.

'My lifeline is my music,' commented one bereaved person. 'I no longer feel alone when I hear music. I can lose myself in music.'

Self healing

Well-meaning relatives and friends say, 'Keep your chin up! It's time to brighten up!' But not always.

When you're feeling pain, allow yourself to feel it deeply. Don't attempt to deny it or put it from your mind too soon. Only when we do our 'grief work' – when grief is fully felt – does healing come.

Feelings denied can surface years later, in alcohol abuse, panic attacks and serious mental or physical illness. Those who appear to adjust to their grief most stoically can be the ones most injured.

Try talking about your loss with a steady-going friend. If you're a private person, pour out your hurt in a journal or an imagined conversation with the one you've lost. It's only as you express your grief that it comes to the surface – and gets out.

The Bible contains a lot of encouragement for the bereaved. Its writer, King David, for example, also experienced loss, and poured out grief in the words: 'My sorrow is beyond healing. My heart is faint within me. . . . My pillow is wet with tears.'





David Ash/CORBIS

Get a reason for living

Perhaps your partner has been your reason for living. If you lost that partner, could you find comfort in dedicating yourself to some project dear to that partner's heart?

For example, Don's wife, Dot, often visited an inner-city school and read to the children. When she died, Don created a colourful and attractive reading corner in the classroom. He found reward in helping the teacher select and order the books, and also comfort in the hope that some of the youngsters would grow up like Dot, lifelong lovers of reading.

Thank you, life!

'Our life is what our thoughts make it,' counselled the Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius two thousand years ago. We can flood our minds with pessimistic thoughts, he points out, or with thoughts that help and heal.

Another friend of mine who'd lost her partner became bitter and brooding, asking again and again, 'Why me?' Better to be like another friend whose thoughts were quite different and who expressed her time with her

lost love this way: 'Thank you, life, for the years we had. Let sorrow give way to warm remembrance. Let tears give way to bright memories. Nothing can take those away!'

Be a wounded healer

Who can better help another's heartbreak than one who's experienced it? Out of our tragedy we can receive a good gift – the soft, selfless, healing quality of empathy.

In the press of living, we are sometimes unaware of needs around us. But out of deep grief we can become more perceptive, compassionate and sensitive to others' needs.

Our listening becomes more caring, our tone of voice more tender. We more easily sense what to do and say when others' hearts are heavy. The poet Emily Dickens calls a wound of hers 'a heavenly hurt' – heavenly in that it helped her to heal others.

Unforeseen doors may open

'From every sorrow life brings, we can derive good,' taught the Stoic philosopher Epictetus.

It was like that for Mark, always a drifter, who lost his wife Ann when a speeding

teenage motorcyclist crashed into her. It was only then that life took on any real meaning for Mark. He began a campaign for improved motorcycle safety education for teenagers, eventually becoming an instructor and a teen mentor.

Redirect your love

'Take the love you gave to the one you've lost and give it to others,' counselled a church minister at a memorial service. In other words, if you no longer have a special someone to whom to give a great love, you can give a lesser love to many.

How people in our life space desperately need this caring! Troubled souls, young and old, can be warmed, lifted up and kept going by a helping hand, a good listener or a friendly greeting. The warmth we give these others will flow right back.

Don't grieve alone

You may want to draw the curtains, darken the room and stay inside following the loss of a loved one, but withdrawing can contribute to deeper and more prolonged grieving. Instead, force yourself to be with people.

Choose your contacts – bird watching, hiking, community help, church or civic, etc. Any group activity will bring you new friends, taking you out of a home that holds saddening memories. It will also promote your physical health. Studies repeatedly show that bereaved people who remain socially isolated have higher death rates than those who develop and maintain a social network. If you fall apart, they'll pick you up!

Be your own best friend

In times of sorrow, give something to yourself. Find time for personal pleasures – a walk, a talk, a good book, travel or moments of rest. And David the psalmist speaks of the renewal to be found in Jesus the 'Good Shepherd' who 'maketh me to lie down in green pastures' (Psalm 23).

Accept a wavering faith

Doubts can be overwhelming when death touches your life. 'How can a merciful God permit me

so much suffering?' you cry. But a faltering faith is not blasphemy. Rather, as with faithful Job, it's the cry of an anguished soul.

Talk out your doubts with the Quiet Presence as you would your closest friend. Admit your wavering faith. There's no point in pretending there – the Presence sees into our hearts anyway. 'Pour out your hearts before God,' the psalmist tells us. And the many who do, develop a deeper faith.

Don't accept the myths

Myths are hurtful and complicate the grieving process. Avoid them.

Myth 1: If you are stable, you will adjust fairly soon. Not so! Grieving for two or three years and longer is not unusual. And you will probably miss the beloved person always.

Myth 2: If your relationship was good, you will have no regrets. Not so. A grief counsellor who has worked with hundreds of clients observed, 'I've never known a client who didn't express some regret.'

Myth 3: If you really loved your partner, you will not feel anger or resentment. Probably not true! A bereaved parent may cry, 'Why has my partner left me to bring up the children alone?' Such thoughts are normal in all human relationships.

