

A
widow's
journey

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*In memory of Chuck
who loved me even on the days
I drove him nuts.*

I miss him.

What am I to be now that I'm a widow?

I study the sky, searching for my answer as if expecting God to write it there with His finger. All I see is a distant silver speck. A plane is heading for some exotic location, carrying couples who will take hand-holding strolls down quaint streets, have romantic dinners under the stars, walk arm-in-arm along a golden beach, and smile intimately at each other as they close their bedroom door.

The world is made for couples like those on that plane. For years I took membership in the Couples Club for granted. But I am no longer a couple. I am a single. One, not two. I no longer belong.

So who am I, now that there's only one plate at the table, one glass, one knife, fork, and spoon, one napkin?

There's only one pillow with a head dent, one towel damp after a shower. There's only one toothbrush in the holder. The seat is never left up anymore.

I can still write Mrs. in front of my name, but I'm no longer in a marriage relationship. You need two people for a marriage, and there's only me.

Terrifying thought. *There's only me.*

The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

DEUTERONOMY 31:8



For years I was defined by a four-letter word—“wife.” I was part of an indivisible pair. Chuck and Gayle. Gayle and Chuck.

Now there's only Gayle, and I'm not certain who she is supposed to be.

Of course I remain mother, grandmother, friend, writer, lover of Jesus...all identities I am glad for and proud of. But being Chuck's wife, my primary identity apart from being a Christian, is lost to me because Chuck is lost to me.

So who am I to be now that there's only me? Now that when people think of me, they don't automatically add, “and Chuck”?

I used to think I was solidly my own person, very self-sufficient in spirit, with a career and professional friends and a professional reputation. That was true and still is, but I'm realizing I wasn't as independent as I liked to think. I was able to feel independent and self-sufficient because I had a wonderful

safety net called marriage and a wonderful man named Chuck ready to catch me if I slipped from my perch.

Now the safety net is gone, and I am in free fall. It's a long way down.

When I said, "My foot is slipping,"
your unfailing love, O LORD, supported me.

When anxiety was great within me,
your consolation brought me joy.

PSALM 94:17-18



I sit and watch the clouds. Some are plump, fluffy, cumulus wonders, exactly what a cloud should be. Fairy-tale clouds, all soft and rounded, ready to float over the princess's castle, harbingers of happily ever after.

Then there are the amorphous clouds, indistinct, flat, and formless. Their edges are blurred with wisps of white vapor that slowly float away and disappear.

That's how being a widow feels. Vague and vaporous. Lacking substance. All ill-defined edges and purposelessness.

It's the aimlessness that I find most difficult. I like purpose and plan. I don't mind if the plan goes awry. I'm willing to adapt. Life is one long lesson in adapting.

And being a widow is the biggest lesson of all, a lesson forced on me by circumstances I didn't plan and would never choose. And I don't want to adapt. I want life back as it was. I

want Chuck's head on the pillow next to mine. I want him at the TV tray next to mine as we eat to the evening news. I want him turning the lights out on me, checking the lock to make sure I turned it correctly, and telling me I bring light to his life.

Instead I'm alone and find myself feeling formless and floaty. I fear my remaining years becoming a mere curl of vapor.

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

GENESIS 1:2-3



I miss being a couple.

I miss having conversations about when we'll leave the party, about who we'll have for dinner, about what to buy the grandkids for Christmas. I miss talking about how much we should give to the church for that special project or where we should go for vacation. I miss discussing where we'll stay on a vacation, he being a Motel 6 man and me a lovely B and B woman. I miss him saying, "You still look pretty good in jeans" even though I can look in the mirror and see the truth.

I miss the dailiness of being a couple. Who's going to pick up the dry cleaning? Can we go out for dinner tonight? What should we watch on TV? When can we afford to redo the kitchen?

I miss someone knowing me better than I know myself. I miss him saying, “Gayle, that’s not a good idea,” and realizing he’s right. I miss him saying, “I’m proud of you,” and basking in the glow.

I know there are worse things in life than being a widow, but at the moment I can’t imagine what they are. I know that my life can still have value, that I can still do and be—when I can figure out what to do and who to be.

I miss being a couple.

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their
labor:
If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep
warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?

ECCLESIASTES 4:9-11



I am having difficulty concentrating. Thoughts melt away like morning mist under the hot sun. I find myself standing, staring into space, trying to recall what I was thinking about. Was it important? And do I care?

I'm unable to make decisions, even simple ones. Should I go to the store? Should I bother doing the wash? Is the dishwasher full enough to run?

I wander from room to room, leaving a trail of half-finished chores in my wake. I start to make the bed but don't complete the job as I wander into the bathroom, where I try to remember if I've taken my meds. And what did I intend to do when I pulled up my bank account online?

Some days I think my brain died with Chuck. I have so many big and little decisions to make—financial, legal, and personal—and I'm thinking with less clarity than ever before in my life.

What if I make a poor choice or take wrong advice while I'm in this foggy place? What if I set something in motion that I can't undo when I begin to think clearly again and realize I made a mistake?

I want to climb in bed and pull the covers over my head.

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.

I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.

Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not
consumed,
for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

LAMENTATIONS 3:19-23



Does the amount of time you've been married determine the depth of your grief when you're widowed? I was married forty-seven years. Haven't I earned the right to a deeper grief than a woman married only two years?

I don't think so. Love is love and loss is loss.

I often think of the young woman I met at a writers' conference several years ago. Her husband of six months, a wonderful guy she deeply loved, had been killed while jogging. This young woman's whole countenance had that stripped, vulnerable look of the deeply bereaved.

She was at the writers' conference thinking that if she could write about this wonderful man she had barely started a life with, she might find a reason for his death.

The problem is that death has no reason except in the broadest sense of the fall of man and the resulting curse of death. But practically, for our individual lives, there is no pattern, no discernible sense of fairness in death. It strikes where it will and when it will. It takes husbands of forty-seven years and husbands of six months, and there is no less pain for either widow.

Each woman's pain is her pain, and she must live it. Alone.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

PSALM 34:18

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you
and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in
heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

MATTHEW 11:28-29



For years life had a certain rhythm, much of it built around Chuck's schedule.

Even though I worked at home, I got up at a certain time because Chuck had to be at work at a certain hour. I ate dinner at a certain time because he came home hungry. I went to bed at a certain time because he needed sleep to get up early for work the next day. I sometimes thought how much I'd love to do what I wanted when I wanted.

Now there's no one to build my life around. I set my own schedule, and it's scary to have the freedom I thought I wanted. I miss the enforced structure. Some people probably structure themselves easily. I have always performed best when trying to please or accommodate someone. Alone, I procrastinate.

Now I have no one saying, "Gayle, it's time for bed," and I stay up much too late.

I have no one asking, “How long until dinner?” and I’m eating poorly.

I have no one reminding me that it’s a good idea to check the balance in the checking account before I run up a charge on the debit card. There’s no one telling me if I don’t start getting ready, I’ll surely be late. I even miss the talk about planning my schedule better to avoid the stress of deadlines.

How will I ever manage me alone?

Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.
From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

PSALM 61:1-3



Which is better, a prolonged decline to the end of life, or a quick, essentially instantaneous death?

With the one, a couple can share thoughts, address problems, make practical arrangements, and say goodbye, but the survivor must endure the pain of watching the decline and distress of a beloved life partner.

With *ka-boom!* there are no goodbyes, and life’s practicalities are often left unaddressed. But there is no painful decline, no extended season of agony and distress.

My friend Bebe walked into her kitchen one morning and

found her husband lying on the floor, his body already cooling. One minute she was thinking about how to cook her egg, and the next she was on her knees, calling Bill's name, pleading with God that this was only a bad dream and could she please wake up. Dramatic, irrevocable change.

We're both widows, me after three and a half years of pre-grieving, she with no warning at all. Is it any easier for one of us because of the manner in which death struck?

We both lie alone in bed at night. We both cook for one (when we bother to cook at all). We both lug our garbage to the curb each week.

Bebe and I are different. Our families are different. Our walks of faith are different.

But our ache is the same.

I cry aloud to the LORD;

I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy.

I pour out before him my complaint;

before him I tell my trouble.

PSALM 142:1-2

Look to the LORD and his strength;

seek his face always.

PSALM 105:4