

# Unforgettable Lessons on Healing From Heart-Scarring Loss

No, I'm not really alone. I never have been, and I never will be.

But grief is hard. My husband died exactly one year ago. I don't think I've ever been through anything so exhausting—not OB-GYN residency, when I'd spend long nights in the hospital with little or no sleep, not the weeks caring for my husband as he became increasingly unable to completely care for himself. They say losing a loved spouse is like losing an arm or a leg. I think it's more like losing most of who you are.

Grief hurts. In some very real ways I've come to terms with the pain, and most of the time, I focus more on the future than on the past. But there's a treasure in grief that you can't purchase any other way. Words don't do it justice, and you'd never choose the pain you have to endure in order to get it. But for those of you who are walking a similar journey, perhaps these ideas will help you find your own treasure.

This is in response to some of you who have asked me to share more about my journey as a widow. I'll try here to share some thoughts about what helped, and God's place in the journey of grief.

## **You Need People**

As Al became increasingly ill, his world became smaller and smaller, and mine did too. That's a common occurrence for caregivers, I'm told. I had struggled to stay engaged with others, even professionally. And after Al's death I realized that outside of family I had no truly close friends. Enjoying grandchildren and grieving with others who miss him too has

been incredibly valuable, but I've had no one I was "doing life with" previously to be there for me and help me see the future.

Some of that was because Al's health was already declining when we moved to this area, and some was a result of my own personality and lifestyle. But it has meant I've had to exert a great deal of energy in finding ways to connect with people, invest in friendship and build a life I now choose. That's hard work.

Some people have said things that were helpful, and some people occasionally still say things that make me want to scream and run away. Perhaps most helpful of all has been a newer friend who has simply continued to ask, "How are you?" Pause. No fixing. Sometimes I talk, sometimes silence. And then, "Just know I'm here."

**My advice:** Realize both family and friends are important. There will only be a few people around your deathbed; how well are you investing in them? Family connections are worth putting up with, risking yourself for and spending time with.

It's just as critical to have one or a few close friends you do life with. When grief comes, someone who's not grieving but who knows you very well can be an invaluable source of support. Choose your friends proactively and wisely, now.

And if you're the friend of someone who's grieving, don't try to fix it. Just be there.

### **Time Passes; Time Alone Doesn't Heal**

Healing isn't something that just happens to you. It's something you choose to believe in, seek, find, and decide to take into your being. It's an active process, one you must invest energy in.

When I came home from the hospital after Al's death, I sat

down with a cup of coffee and my Bible, and opened it to 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's treatise on death and resurrection. I knew the place to go. All my previous investment in my relationship with God came into play at that time. But it didn't lessen the pain. It's not supposed to. Death is not normal in God's universe; we were made for eternity. We still sorrow. It's only in eternity that God will wipe all tears from our eyes (see Rev. 21:4).

In some ways, it seems like Al died just yesterday. Time doesn't deal with all his personal things, make the pain go away or build a life. I get to decide whether to stay stuck or to step forward. I get to choose what memories to embrace, how to honor his life, what to carry forward and what to build into my future. The speed of those decisions doesn't matter nearly as much as deciding to decide.

During the initial weeks and months, I would feel depressed every evening. When my mind was clear in the morning, I'd have a few hours when I could focus on writing, work or other productive matters, and when I'd get tired and sad later in the day, I'd just have to stop. Quit. Rest. Do nothing. That has lessened a lot now, and most days, I hold on to hope and joy and feel energetic all day. Doing the work of grief makes that possible.

**My advice:** Don't worry at all about how fast you move forward, but do worry a great deal about choosing whether or not you will move forward. Do the work of grief. Deal with the stuff—physically, emotionally, spiritually. Do it at your own pace, but do it. Decide to decide. Choose healing. There are no medals for speed, but determine that you will not quit, no matter what.

### **Head and Heart Are Both Important**

I attended a GriefShare group for a few months after Al's death. As I told the facilitator, my head knows all this, but

my heart needs the human connections. Frankly, I was somewhat disappointed theologically in the videos, workbook and email messages, but that's not why I went. I knew I had to do the hard work of connecting with people if I were to move forward.

Early on I was so concerned about doing grief right. Am I feeling what I'm supposed to feel? Am I doing the right things? Confusion, anxiety, exhaustion and sadness made it difficult to think at times. I read books: *A Grief Observed* (C.S. Lewis), *Understanding Your Grief* (Alan D. Wolfelt), *Experiencing Grief* (H. Normal Wright) and *Grieving with Hope* (Samuel J Hodges). I finally realized there is no "right" way to grieve. I often wished for a road map, a timeline. But I learned to keep walking even when I couldn't figure it out, and experienced again that God is always there.

Doing things to remember Al has also been important. I retraced our most memorable anniversary vacation. I had a memory quilt made from some of Al's clothes. I made a shadow box of items related to his funeral and included our wedding rings. I've watched over and over the slideshow of pictures we prepared a year ago to remember his life. When an ambush of grief washes over me emotionally, I take time to stop and cry. And yes, those ambushes happen much less frequently than they did during the initial weeks.

**My advice:** Consciously give both your head and your heart attention. Seek out godly wise input from books, support groups, people, Scripture and more. Study grief, so to speak. Doing so does not make everything OK, but it helps you find your own path through the wilderness.

And also find ways to honor the emotional journey you are on. God created us human beings with feelings, limitations, emotions, desires, needs, fears and so on. Embrace them. Go there! But then make the decision to keep going. Don't park there. Feel it, and then take one more step no matter how difficult it is to do so.

## The Future Exists

My head knows this. My heart sometimes still struggles to feel it. But there are a few things I know for certain:

- As long as I'm still alive, God has a purpose for me here.
- God can and already has used my pain to minister to others.
- In eternity, God will wipe my tears away, and it will be enough.

Who I am as a person has deepened in significant ways as a result of my journey of grief. I've realized an increased depth in my own writing. The kinds of issues people talk and write to me about have deepened—not necessarily about grief, but about life. The well of what I have to offer is significantly richer in many areas. There's an increased substance to what I bring to ministry and to the world in general.

I believe that has happened because God has honored my decision to not quit. I've brought the totality of my stuff—my past medical and ministry training, my painful experiences including my grief, my strengths and limitations—and given God permission to do what He will with them. He is a miracle-worker in taking our stuff and making it into something meaningful and valuable.

I'm not going after comfort or happiness. I'm blessed with a certain measure of clarity about the mission for which God has me here on Earth, and that's what I'm about. Knowing God does not make it not hurt, but He provides the reason to keep going. He is the source of healing as you seek for it. He is the safe place you can always run to.

**My advice:** Choose to believe in the future. If you're alive, God is not finished with you yet. He still has something here for you to do. If you're grieving, God can take that pain and

use it. Worry not at all about how far into the future you can see right now. Simply worry about which direction you are turning your gaze.

Embrace the memories. It's good to treasure them. But then make certain you are turning your gaze in the direction of the future. God is already in your future, and He will meet you in the next moment, the next day, and all the days yet to come.  
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**Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley** is both a board certified OB-GYN physician and an ordained Doctor of Ministry. As an author and speaker, she loves helping people discover the Fully Alive kind of life that Jesus came to bring us. Visit her website at .