

REFLECTIONS  
OF A  
GRIEVING SPOUSE

H. NORMAN WRIGHT



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## THE DISRUPTION OF OUR LIFE TOGETHER

I do.” Two words, that’s all. But they signify the beginning of a committed relationship designed to last throughout life on earth. They are much anticipated words, and their expression to one another is filled with joy. Often they are said with a definite or emphatic tone because they’re cementing the conclusion of the courtship journey and marking the entrance to the marital path.

Two little words...but very significant. Throughout the marriage there will be many couplets of words that become standard: “See you.” “I’m home.” “Food ready?” “What’s up?” “Love you.” “Let’s go.” “Ready yet?” These are all part of an ongoing relationship, and they connect two people together.

But there comes a time when words disconnect a relationship or signify with sadness it’s over. As some words carry the feeling of joy or delight, others denote sorrow. When these are expressed they take the place of countless others now silenced and never to be heard again. Silence can be eerie, heavy, overwhelming. I heard it at “Ground Zero” in New York after the September 11, 2001 destruction. I heard it on the streets of destroyed homes in the Ninth Ward in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Now I hear it every day in my home. There are words I’ll never hear again from Joyce, and words I’ll never say again to her. What I would give for one more conversation with her. Yes, I can put in a CD and hear Joyce’s words. I can read again the letters I just discovered that she wrote to me during our courtship

and the ones she wrote to her mother the first year of our marriage. But that's different. It's just not the same.

Now, in place of all the words of joy, there are others. "Goodbye" is a constant, whether I verbalize it or not. There is so much to say goodbye to. It seems endless. When something occurs I think of going home and sharing it with Joyce...but then certain words come to mind: "Not here." "Never again." The most difficult couplet occurs when someone asks how Joyce is or there's a phone call for her. I hesitate for a second before saying what I hate to: "Joyce died." I know it's necessary. I know it's true. But I wish it weren't. I still resist saying the words, but I force them out. It's reality.

So a new vocabulary centered around being alone has to be established.

The loss of our spouses changes our entire lives. It shifts the foundation of our existence. Nothing is as it was. Even the familiar becomes unfamiliar. Every aspect of our lives is disrupted without our partners. Everything has to be relearned, just as a flooded river does when it recedes and leaves behind a maze of new streams.

In a culture that doesn't like to acknowledge loss or talk about its impact, grieving is difficult. And when we add this silence to the fact that most of us have never been taught about the process and normalcy of grief, no wonder we struggle.

Prior to the death of your spouse, your life was going in a well-established direction. You had an identity. You could say who you were. This has changed. You're not exactly who you were. The person you lost was part of your identity. You were someone's spouse, someone's partner. You continue to be that person in your heart and memory, but there's a vacant place where your loved one stood.

## **Grief**

We've probably all known grief to some degree. It can creep into our lives subtly and so slowly we're not always aware of its presence for a long time. There are some who have carried their grief for so many years they don't know anything else and believe that state to be normal.

Grief accompanies the slow deterioration of a spouse. Without even putting it into words you are grieving your mate's leaving you for weeks and months before he or she dies. That's what I experienced with Joyce. I knew...but I didn't want to know. I knew that it would soon be over when she said, "No more surgeries." I wouldn't allow myself to face the reality of the next few weeks...that there would be a time when Joyce would die. There was a part of me that said, "No! No, it won't happen." Even during the presence of people from hospice I denied it. "It can't happen. It won't happen to my Joyce. This isn't real."

Even today, after a month, there are times when I walk through the house sensing its emptiness but still saying, "No, she's not gone." If her absence is real that means the future, as well as the present, is one big "without." And the episodic bouts of intense grief are not just a gentle building of what was there before Joyce died, but more like an intruder that kicks the door down, comes in, and takes over.

*Grief.* What do you know about this experience? We use the word so easily. It's the state we're in when we've lost a loved one. It's an inward look. You've been called into the house of mourning. It's not a comfortable place. It's not where you want to reside, but for a time, longer than you wish, you will. Often it will hurt, confuse, upset, and frighten you. Grief can be described as intense emotional suffering and acute sorrow.

In grief the bottom falls out of your world, especially when a spouse is lost. The solid footing you had before is gone. The floorboards are tilting or turning into soft, pliable mud with each step you take. The stability of yesterday's emotions gives way to feelings that are so raw and fragile you think you're losing your mind. You're alone. Well, you *feel* alone, but you're really not. Jesus is with you. He's "a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief" (Isaiah 53:3 TLB).

Grieving is a very disorderly process. You have no control over it, and you can't schedule every aspect of its expression. People live according to schedules. So when you've experienced a major loss you're really thrown. Grief knows no schedule. It won't fit into your appointment book.<sup>1</sup> It's like an invader from another planet as it disrupts your mind

