

WIDOWED AT FORTY

When a relationship is right, your whole world is good and secure. It was like that with my husband Bob. It was as if we were one person. I was too dependent on him, I see that now, but at the time it seemed perfectly natural. Whatever Bob wanted, I wanted. A weekend home in the country, horses, plans for a “walk and ride” vacation someday in Florida. Bob, a tremendously active person, seemed to have a major project each day he was home from his job as a firefighter.

Our 21 years of life together were full, active, and wonderful. I will love him for all eternity. He suspected that he might have heart problems someday because his family had a long history of early deaths due to heart problems. He worked hard as a firefighter and around our small farm, exercised and stayed in shape. He did not expect to die young.

Sudden death was the first symptom of my husband’s heart disease. On a warm spring day, Bob was in our garden preparing the soil for planting. He was 40 years old and felt fine. Suddenly he was dead. A massive coronary.

In an instant I became a 40 year old widow and single parent to an 11 year old daughter. In one unbelievable, shattering moment, life as I had known and planned for, was over. My dependence on Bob was so complete I had no identity or resources to draw on for strength. I had no faith in God. I had nothing. I was nothing. Bob was my life, and Bob was gone.

After the trip to the hospital emergency room, I did not see Bob again. That was a big mistake. I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of having time to say goodbye to the body of a loved one. It is extremely important to have a viewing and funeral service so you can say goodbye and have that important moment to realize the person you loved is no longer in that body. I did not take those important steps. I did not see the body; I did not say goodbye and I was not assured the man I loved no longer resided in that body.

Bob’s body was buried in a small cemetery. It seemed to me that I put my beloved husband in the cold ground. I was bewildered.

Numb with shock and grief without someone to guide me through the grieving process.

My family stepped in and did the best they could, but I was very much alone. Now I know not seeing the body prolonged my grieving and made it more difficult.

My family, mother, father, sister and brother rallied around and comforted me as best they could. However, we failed to acknowledge that other family members grieve too, and are in no condition to comfort anyone. It helped to have them around me, but the time came when they had to get on with their lives, and I was left on my own.

I felt absolutely helpless because of my complete emotional dependence on Bob. Unfortunately, I was unable to help my daughter. I was too wounded by Bob’s death. I was still her mother but could not provide emotional support for her. She, too, was frighteningly on her own. Happily, today I can say that in spite of my emotional abandonment, she not only survived but has done amazingly well with her life. She is 25 years old, happily married, an accomplished nurse and the mother of two.

Over time I was able to recover enough to take care of money matters, home care, and everyday chores. It all came fairly easy and I made some mistakes. I sold almost everything, invested in the stock market, and spent money trying to ease my guilt and make it up to my daughter. I got a job and went to work every day. To the outside worked my daughter and I looked okay, but six months later I remained emotionally devastated.

Finally, in a moment of desperation, I looked in the telephone directory under the word “widow” to see if there was any help for me. I found the Widowed Persons Service (WPS). I called and the woman who answered the phone told me about support sessions held at the YWCA every Thursday evening. I went the next Thursday, peeked inside and saw a room full of people. I was scared and went back home. The next Thursday I arrived early and waited inside the darkened room for the director, Marie Gooderham to appear. I hoped that she might

come early, and blessedly, she did. She stepped into the room, turned on the light and saw me sitting in a chair by the huge board room size table.

I spoke first, "Well you said on the phone you could help me. I'm here, so please help me." She smiled and said, "I'm glad you're here."

At that support session I found sharing my story with other widowed people and hearing their experiences was my road to recovery. I felt better immediately. I was not much better, but better. It was a start.

They understood and listened. I repeated the story of Bob's death again and again, yet no matter how I said it or how many times I said it, they were there for me. No one else could offer the same support, not the clergy, psychologists, counselors, or even family and friends. The widowed were there for me.

I recall one meeting in particular when I was talking at length about my guilt. I felt I was solely responsible for Bob's death. Marie asked me a simple question, "Barbara, is it possible that you're not in control of everything? Is it possible that when it comes to matters of life and death that you, Barbara Simmons, are not so all powerful?"

The question made me think. I will never forget the relief I felt at the moment to know I was not responsible for Bob's death. Believe me, good things happen at WPS sessions. Grief support is "financed" with "reality checks" that are handed out free of charge; they are an immense help.

At a WPS support session, I met a widower who was an avid runner. He was starting a jogging group and asked if anyone at the session would like to join. I knew exercise could help because it had helped me a few years ago when I had a bout with depression. I joined the jogging group and began to recover my emotional and physical health.

As the years passed, I changed from jogging to a cross training program of fast walking and weight training to ease the strain on my leg joints, especially the knees, I still exercise daily and share what I have learned about exercise and health with other widows.

Some of the things I have done that have been the most help in adopting a new life style are, visiting other widows (especially the newly widowed), teaching an exercise class for older women at a health club, and writing a book about fitness and health for older women. Surviving as Bob's wife without him was impossible so, after 13 years, I have become a whole new person.

Barbara Simmons, "Thanatos," Winter 1993