

WIDOW



by Renee Splichal Larson

When I became a widow I began to notice how many widows and widowers were around me. So many people, young and old, had felt the deep pain of losing the one with whom they had been one flesh.

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I remember one time in seminary when Ben and I quickly grabbed dinner at Kentucky Fried Chicken in Dubuque [Iowa]. Two booths away from us I noticed an elderly man eating alone. He seemed sad and lonely. Right or wrong, I assumed his spouse had died. My heart ached for him. I told Ben that I could not bear it if he died. But within the year, Ben was dead and I was the one seated at an empty table.

Some of the significant days, especially anniversary dates and birthdays, I would dread for weeks, only to have them come and go like any other day. And then there would be a “normal” Tuesday when I would wake up and the tears would already be flowing. I would be numb and drained of all energy. I never knew when these hard days would come.

Before Ben died in the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, I did not think about how hard it might be for the surviving spouse to get bills in order and remember simple things. I was driving on the interstate in North Dakota late one night when I saw flashing lights behind me.

The officer approached my window and said, “Your tabs are expired. You needed to renew them more than a year ago. Why haven’t you taken care of that?”

“Well, it’s a long story,” I said, not wanting to get into it or to have him feel sorry for me.

“I have time.”

“My husband died and it wasn’t at the top of my priority list to renew the tabs on my car...” I paid a small fine and took care of the tabs the following week.

Scripture notices widows. Before the earthquake I would pass over the word “widow” in the Bible as a mere adjective. Now I pause and imagine the depth of loss, the complexity and uncertainty of the future, and the greater details of that one’s life, which we rarely get to hear in the story.

Acts 9 tells the story of Dorcas and the many widows she cared for. When Dorcas died, the community called for Peter. They wept as they showed him the tunics and other clothing Dorcas had made. They wanted Peter to see the work of her hands and know how much she had meant to all of them. When the widows wept, they did not mourn only for Dorcas, but for the spouses they had

lost, perhaps children who had died, and for the finality of death in this world. Grief compounds upon grief. However, the story ends with new life when Peter resuscitates Dorcas. Mourning turns to dancing.

After Ben died I had a number of conversations with other widows. One woman lost her husband to suicide. She told me she spent time in the “grief room” of her being. She said, “There is a room in me where I go to grieve. There are times I enter it and stay for a short time. There are times I just sit in it for hours. Other times I move to different corners of the room and explore what I find there, never putting pressure on myself to explore the whole room at once. When I need to, I leave the room and continue with the necessary aspects of my life, whether caring for my children, going to class, or working. If I can’t get out of the room, I ask someone who loves me to help escort me out. When I’m ready again, I go and visit my ‘grief room’ that will be in me for the rest of my life.” This is how I envisioned much of my grief work.

Another widowed woman told me she gave away all of her husband’s things within days of his death because it was simply too painful for her to have his stuff around. It quickly became clear to me that everyone dealt with the loss of their spouse differently and that was okay.

One widower told me he eventually had to move out of town and find a new job. Otherwise, everywhere he went, and with everyone he met, he felt like he was “bleeding all over the place.”

In some places in Haiti widows wear black for two years after their spouse dies. The color of their garments tells the whole community: “I lost someone. My life is different. I am in mourning.”

One of my Haitian friends told me, “Wear something of Ben’s to give you strength. He passed on his strength to you and his life when he died. He helped you survive in Haiti, and he will continue to help you.”

I also had a conversation with a woman who lost her husband in a horrible car crash 15 years before. She was in the car with him along with her infant grandson and two family friends. It was midday and they were driving on a two-lane road. Someone heading their way in the opposite direction crossed the centerline and hit them

head-on. This woman's grandson died as well as her husband. She was hurt, but her injuries were not fatal.

We sat at my kitchen table, and tears streamed down her face as she told me this story even 15 years later. I could feel the sorrow that remained in her and also her deep love for her husband and grandson. "There were times," she said, "early on after my husband died when I felt his presence in the room, almost like he was sitting next to me." Through her tears she spoke of her gratitude for life.

The word *gratitude* stands out to me because of a phone conversation with another widow. I knew her from Wartburg Seminary (Dubuque, Iowa), but she had graduated and was serving a congregation in Texas. She had become a widow at age 25, 10 years before; her husband had died of cancer.

She spoke of the way he would smell after mowing the lawn with fresh-cut grass on his skin. She described his smile and what their home together meant to her. They did not have children, so after his death, she poured herself into improvements on their house. A few months later she finished the construction, sold the house, and moved out.

When I spoke with her, she was engaged to be married. I asked her how her life was now, a decade later. She said one word: "Gratitude." She was so thankful for her life with her first husband, to have known and loved him like none other. She was also thankful for her life now and the man she was going to marry. "Gratitude," she said, "to God and for life.

I have had other widows look me straight in the eye and say, "Renee, you will be okay." They would say it over and over to me. Not, "Everything will be okay," but rather, "You, Renee, will be okay." They could say that. They had been through it. They trusted that God would help me be okay.

After Rebecca Wee, a poet and English professor at Augustana College (Rock Island, Illinois), lost her husband, Michael, a fellow widow named Gertrude paid her a visit. Rebecca told me about the depth of pain she felt after Michael's death and Gertrude's helpful words:

"After Michael died, I wasn't prepared for how pain-

ful it was to navigate people's efforts to be comforting. Everyone meant well, but the platitudes and wrongness of most of what was said scraped me raw; I felt worse and lonelier. There simply wasn't help for that level of hurt, for a very long time.

"The one encounter I carry though, still, because it felt right and true at the time, and has proved to be exactly that, was with 86-year-old Gertrude Lundholm. When Gertrude's husband, Beanie, died she was bereft, and after I returned to Augustana in 1999, she invited me over for coffee and got right to it. Bright blue eyes flashing, she said, 'Well, I bet everyone's telling you it's going to get better, and you want to slap them across the face. But you also want to believe they're right because it doesn't seem possible that anything will ever feel better, does it? It *doesn't* really get better—it will never be all right that you have to live the rest of your life without the man you loved. You should have had a long, beautiful life together. You were just getting started.

'But it will get *different*, Rebecca, and you'll see that that will be enough. It will. You will have a good and full and meaningful life because you know what love is. You're going to miss him all of your days, but it's not always going to hurt like it does now.'

"It was the truest thing anyone said to me in those terrible years. No platitudes from Gertrude. And she was right."

Through these conversations with other widows and my own experience of living after the earthquake, I realized that God does not promise us a better life after such loss, or the same life, but rather new life. And this new life is still good and worth living.

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