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REFLECTIONS FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A SPOUSE AFTER A LENGTHY MARRIAGE:
WITH A MODEST ATTEMPT AT SOME ADVICE

INTRODUCTION

Reflection following the death of a spouse after a lengthy marriage. Now why would I develop this paper for presentation to colleagues?

I have lived almost two years since my wife Carol's passing in January 2023 after 63 years of a wonderful marriage. The months have not been easy, but I will note quickly that I have no intention of drawing you into personal details more appropriate for my family, my closest colleagues, or even a professional advisor. And this paper was not developed because I can claim extraordinary insights about the passing of a long-time partner, as if I have professional standing or clinical expertise. At the same time, this is not a paper that has been written from a dispassionate, scholarly bent typical of the papers we present at Fortnightly, but from a real-life experience.

It is impossible to deny that when a beloved spouse dies, the world changes. Mourning sets in quickly with a mix of feelings... grief and sorrow, maybe even anger at a spouse for leaving, maybe a bit of guilt. Did I do enough and should the blame of her death rest on my shoulders? Difficult, demanding, painful. Even some numbness. Maybe, the most bitter of all losses.

Mourning takes its own course and the hard work of putting life back together in new ways begins, like nothing before. Somehow the value of grief must be understood and accepted. So many experts write – and it seems to me it is so – that there is no conclusion; the reality of death may fade just a bit, but it doesn't go away.

Having said all of this, I asked myself “Is this paper for you or for me?” My sincere interest is in offering some musings for men who still must in the days and years ahead face the death of their spouse. I suppose there also is underlying some recognition that my work in preparing this paper has been a part of my own traveling to learn to live without Carol. My up-front objective, however, is that some thoughts drawn from my experience, accompanied by lots of reading, might prompt some reflection for men who are yet to face the passing of a partner.

TOPICS THAT SPRING FROM MY EXPERIENCES

A long time ago while toiling as an Army airborne first lieutenant, the phrase *prior planning prevents poor performance* was drilled into my brain. Carol and I we did plan a few of the steps that would be called upon when either of us died. But we did leave some decisions hanging or unresolved and It is likely that there are lessons to be shared, not unique only to our experiences. These topics that follow might suggest that planning before death of a partner is very important.

Planning for Death Decisions

I wonder aloud whether there is anyone here who is postponing the discussions that should take place with loving spouses about decisions required following death. Not the kind of table talk for a romantic Friday evening dinner, to be sure, but maybe for a planned time that is dreaded but necessary. This might even lead to a scheduled meeting with a mortuary of your choice, but this we’ll get to in a moment.

While this may sound a bit trivial, and while we never focused our joys on possessions, we should have discussed who might benefit from what we possess when we are gone. With us, wonderful jewelry from Greece, from a handful of other places, and from Ozels in Redlands should have been discussed, should not have just been left only for me and our daughter to distribute in love to others. And what about Carols’s art that when sold ranged into middle five figures. Our children constantly said, “please don’t sell more mom.” Ok, but now I wish Carol could help me determine how the remaining fifty some paintings should be given. I must admit, we didn’t get all of this done. What a huge task ahead.

Better if you have had some of these conversations - art and jewelry for us, a few other treasured things. Maybe you’d want to give this some consideration now to possessions your spouse and you will gift to family and friends.

The Dreaded Visit to the Mortuary

Yes, reluctantly, way back in March of 2018, we made our way to a local mortuary. Appointment set a bit ahead. The conclusions produced lots of papers, and a bit of money in advance to hold the details until death. Dreaded by us both but important we knew, and

in a sense, a gift to each other. So many questions - cremation or not, is viewing of the deceased recommended or not, is there a memorial service or not, how many death certificates would we want? I thought, how about none. But that would not do.

This was all handled with professionalism, you might say cold and awkward, with this stranger who did his best to care for us. But this is tough duty my friends when you are in the middle of it. Patience, I suppose a top priority, not lingering on this too long most likely a necessity, and maybe a strong drink or a big hug or both when this is completed would be a good idea.

Document signed, funds paid in advance, and we were out. Duty accomplished with no hint of when we would call in these plans. This is a step you must be sure to take.

Estate Planning

Oh my. Here is the summary of estate documents updated in 2016 – wills, revocable trusts, disposition charts, certification of trust, durable powers of attorney, advance health care directives, with the originals left with the legal corporation who completed these forms with us.

I assume each of you has completed such a document! But I know two aging relatives of mine who have not completed this work who, because of my tales, now have attorney appointments scheduled.

Here is a start to a list of questions. A revocable or non-revocable will? When is the last time you checked to be sure it is updated in the light of recent changes in this State? What about naming the power of attorney if your mind slips just a bit, oh my not me! What about the attorney for health affairs? That could be a hard one. When is the last time you called your closest attorney to ask, “Have I done all the estate planning I should do to prepare, or have I anticipated actions required when my wife or partner passes?”

After my attorney son Jon had spent long hours, yes days, helping his mother-in-law settle estate matters for her husband some time ago, he urged me to get my documents in order with all the attachments that would tell the story so as our power of attorney and estate executor his tasks would be more manageable. I made my long summary of everything I thought relevant, filed it with the important and official documents in a file drawer, pointed out where this stuff resided, and asked Jon to go through it as if Carol and I both were gone. He spent a couple of hours reviewing my work. I got passing marks.

The Long List of Business Details with Names to Be Changed

It was only days following Carol's death that I became aware of the long lists of tasks that would be mine to bear - to change accounts, to remove Carol's name from official documents - burdens that could not have been completed prior to the death of a spouse. I suppose it might suffice in this recital to refer to the list of such tasks that are developed by AARP and by a few helpful Websites. In this paper I have listed an example to give you a start.¹ In one reference I reviewed there are 31 topics with sub sections to illustrate my point. Some must be done immediately, others within a few days of death, others in the weeks ahead.

The amount of paperwork will take you by surprise. You might need help from professionals, lawyers or CPAs, or just friends or relatives, but the surprise for me is that this took a full year. Just as an aside, the tasks required to change all official documents only to my name were not very pleasant. The officials on the other end of my calls did not help much with their "I'm sorry for your loss," when it was understood why I was calling. The sorrow that came with every call got very weary. Well-meaning on the other end of the line; tedious to hear it again and again.

Social Impact with the Death of a Spouse²

I have drawn heavily on a government document, cited in this paper, that focuses on the death of a spouse that is "ranked on life event scales as the most stressful of all possible losses.² This is likely in part because the death of a spouse ends the relationship but does not sever all relational bonds that I cite as examples - being co-managers of house and family but now the other manager is not available. It's all mine (or yours I might add). Or you both used to belong to a church, or a local club, and fellow members of other social units. The social scene to which one has been accustomed has evaporated.

Moreover, the same issue comes into play inside the home. This material I cite here makes clear that there are two distinct aspects to marital partnerships. The partnership of marriage also serves to divide familial labor. If successful, both husband and wife look to each other to collaborate in the setting of marital policy. How should money be used? Where should they live? Should they have children? ... the burden of sole responsibility for children is especially difficult...The loss of a spouse leaves the survivor to plan alone. Following the death of a spouse, the survivor is left with unfamiliar tasks to be accomplished in addition to accustomed ones.

Moreover, if the marriage is characterized by an intense sharing of intimate lives... the loss of a spouse who has been a 'best friend' represents additional impoverishment... The death of a spouse is likely to alter a person's social role and standing in the community.

¹<http://www.aarp.org> (a checklist of what to do after someone dies).

² [Hrrpa://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK21784](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK21784). Chapter 4: *Reactions to Particular Types of Bereavement. Death of a Spouse*. This material includes 78 references that are useful when studying bereavement.

Most notably is the exclusion from the sociability of couples. Following death of one of the two and these patterns are broken.³

There are awkward moments felt by the surviving spouse and, sometimes somewhat unwittingly, accentuated by close friends and associated. Awareness of this reality is important. Alas, I'm not prepared to offer individual advice or recommendations.

TWO TOPICS THAT SEEM TO SHOW UP IN JUST ABOUT EVERY REFERENCE ABOUT SPOUSAL DEATH: 'WIDOWHOOD' AND DATING OR MARRYING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

The Widowhood Effect

As I was browsing the internet for helpful advice, what should suddenly appear... the topic of 'widowhood'. You know what I found? That I had a significantly increased risk of dying in comparison to those of you whose spouses are living. Mmm. Is this because of self-neglect... I'm doing my best to brush my teeth, shower before going to the Country Club, dressing ok for meetings and responsibilities. I am working to have a network of friends and colleagues, social support and self-care, yes all of this is supposed to help me manage this grief that I feel, that really doesn't go away. The official name of this disease - it's called the "widowhood effect."⁴

And there are statistics to provide a bit of evidence that grieving a spouse's death increases the risk of dying. A 2013 article in *Time* reminds us that after losing a spouse, men were "70% more likely to die than similarly aged men who did not lose a spouse" and that "losing a spouse forces people into what is often one of the most vulnerable parts of their lives."⁵ The authors suggest that among men of all ages, the increased mortality risk could be tied to the detrimental effects of loneliness in older age that can impact physical as well as mental health. Another study showed that "people had a 66% increased mortality risk within the first 90 days of losing their spouse."⁶

CNN reported the risk in this way - an elderly man or woman dying from any cause increases between 30% and 90% in the first three months after a spouse's death, then drops to about 15% in the months that follow. The widowhood effect has been documented in all ages and races around the world.⁷

I found no firm evidence for what causes this. Could it be that the physical and mental toils of being the caretaker may have meant that that their own health and well-being was

³Holmes, T.H. and Rahe, R.H. The Social Readjustment Rating Scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 11, 213-218, 1967.

⁴<https://www.ncoa.org/article/the-widowhood-effect-how-to-survive-the-loss-of-a-spouse>.

⁵ [Htpa://rimw.com/6265173/men-dying/after-spouse-dies](http://rimw.com/6265173/men-dying/after-spouse-dies).

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4181424>.

⁷ Andee LaMotte, CNN, Sunday, April 11, 2021, 9:27am.

neglected? Or maybe the physiological impact of grief, poor sleep, weight loss, higher levels of inflammation in one's body resulting from grief? Or lack of a support system? Or the disruption of lifestyle following the death of a spouse? In some cases, the love shared by spouses is so strong that grief can cause actual harm to the heart.⁸

While this tag, The Widowhood Effect, associated with the death of a spouse, may just give a name to the heart wrenching stages of grief, it emphasizes the importance of being deliberate to consider steps that will make coping with this death a bit more manageable.

Dating/Remarrying After the Loss of a Spouse⁹

I was not surprised but intrigued by the plethora of advice in published material about dating and marrying after the loss of a spouse. Dating, not a word I would use, but engaging in social exchange or experiences with other widowed or single adults is something that seems a hot topic, especially at retreat centers, and centers like Plymouth Village, I might say.

Dating, that old fashioned word, or even remarrying is more complicated to consider than I could have imagined. A surprising reaction that I would not have expected... when the thought of someone else slipped into my drifting mind – what would Carol have thought. Oh, on the surface, “sure Jim this makes sense after all and I want you to be as happy as possible.” But underneath, oh I cannot believe that would have been her thoughts at all. We belonged together. Even more sensitive, what would children and grandchildren, who loved her deeply, think, and even softly whisper to each other.

My thoughts range from that I could never meet the standard of the relationship that I enjoyed with Carol to acknowledging that the experts do reinforce the point that it is possible to be happy in a new relationship even with deep thought still lingering for a deceased partner. But this sounds just too simplistic when compared to real life situations. And the pain of Carol's death even as time is passing makes it clear; that relationship will always be in my memory, deeply embedded as good as it was. Maybe connections will come in the months and years ahead. And is it possible to be torn between my love and devotion to Carol and also to a love that might be explored with a new person? Conflicting feelings of love and guilt are often mixed and can be overwhelming

The clinicians say that loving and grieving can be experienced at the same time. An oft-referenced thought – you do not have to stop loving your deceased spouse to find love again.¹⁰ The literature emphasized that widowers who establish a new quasi-marital

⁸ <https://www.abc57.com/news/losing-a-long-term-spouse-can-be-deadly-studies-show>.

⁹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/understanding/grief/dating/after/the/loss/of/a/spouse>.
Many references, this but a single example.

¹⁰ <https://www.joncake.com/blog/remarriage-after-death-of-spouse>.

relationship a few months after bereavement do expect their new partners to be sympathetic to their continued grieving.

Enough of this! I guess we could think about this some more. For now, it is so interesting that the literature seems to focus so much on this topic.

STEPS THAT CAME WITH GOOD ADVICE FROM PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES AND FRIENDS

What I have to offer by way of advice to grieving widowers is some combination of what I have garnered from life counselors, my friends, and a few things I have learned by experience. I'll be brief. And I will admit that while these thoughts are taken from a variety of professional sources, I have decided to emphasize what seems to make the most sense to me.

First the obvious – pay attention to personal care, simply good sense. Be kind to yourself. Eat well, exercise regularly, and hug the pillows. Limit alcoholic intake. Get a pet... come on! Not for me. Determine/rethink what spiritual values have meaning for us as individuals.

If the strain of this new life tells us that coping requires some professional help, don't hesitate.

Stay not just busy but productive, be intentional. For me I will cite four personal examples, about which I will comment briefly just to illustrate the point.

- Pakistan
- Teaching and professional assignments
- Symphony Board
- 'Papa'

This is just the time to think seriously about what in one's belief system provides the resources upon which one can depend. For me, I find value in the basic tenets of a Christian life, without today prescribing the tenets or prescriptions that might bring me to offer some kind of a sermon.

Don't hide from people as grief can be a lonely enough process without isolating. Do not isolate yourself from those who care for you.

- Family attention, hovering, more than a tad important.
- Those who have been so generous with reaching to me: Ron, Phil, Phil Glotzbach, Bil, Jim Dennis, my grandchildren....
- Seek contact, welcome it.

SELECTED CONCLUSIONS

Mourning is not something that ends and then life as before begins again. This seems so obvious but is hard to understand until it happens.

Don't put up a brave front. Surround yourself with people for whom you don't have to pretend to be OK. We sometimes like to rise above the frays, to show how strong we are. No, time to depend upon those who care for you. It's your turn.

What else?

It is likely that the more profound is the loss, the longer the recovery process.

In one sense, can we ever really be prepared?

I and those of us experiencing the death of a spouse with whom we have built love and life must work to establish a pace in life that fits us as individuals. Figure out one's own pace. The objective of course is to find joy and new meaning in life even after such a painful loss.

Easier said than done and, for sure, requires deliberate steps...