

GROWTH THROUGH GRIEF

Tom Pisello

 **HIGHERLIFE**
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Growth through GRIEF: A Widower's Guide to Healing and Renewed Purpose

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This book is the result of the vision God gave Tom Pisello to provide a path of healing and relief to other widowers like himself. He has juxtaposed his own story along with those of other widowers next to the wisdom of many healthcare professionals to compile a unique help to the grieving heart. Everyone who grieves goes on their own journey. No two are alike. For the sake of readability and to prevent confusion, all the stories and information in this book has been written in third person, including Tom's.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my beautiful bride, Judy, who will always be loved and missed, and our beautiful daughters, Sophia and Alaina, who reflect the way their mom raised them each and every day.

And to all who have experienced their own loss: prayers and peace as you take each day of your own grief journey, one at a time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not be possible without the contributions of so many widower brothers who were willing to transparently share their stories—the good, the bad, and the ugly—as well as mental health professionals, experts, and spiritual leaders who freely shared their insight and advice to help guide and heal.

Thank you, Christopher Ice, Joey Pazzelli, Fred Colby, Terrell Whitener, David Brock, and Tim Ohai, for so openly and honestly contributing your stories.

Thank you to our experts, including Jon Thurman, Pastor Chris Wassermann, Carly Paige, Dr. Kirsten Carter, Mary-Frances O'Connor, PhD, and Pastor Joseph Thompson.

A special thank you to Helen Keeling-Neal, mental health professional, widow, and dear friend, who sat down with me for dozens of interviews to discuss everything from treatment options to dating again.

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MEET THE AUTHOR

Tom Pisello is a widower and the father of two daughters. Tom lost Judy, his wife of nineteen years, in 2017 after her ten-year battle with cancer.

As a result, Tom founded Growth through Grief, a set of healing resources and a ministry through which he shares his personal growth through his grief, and helps other widowers with their unique healing process. Through his own journey, Tom achieved sobriety, lost sixty pounds, gained a growth mindset, rekindled lost faith, and is now sharing these hard-earned lessons along with the experiences of other experts and widowers in this book.



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Prior to creating Growth through Grief, Tom was a successful entrepreneur, analyst, speaker, and author of the business books entitled *Evolved Selling* and *The Frugalnomics Survival Guide*. Known as “The ROI Guy,” he is also the founder of the value, sales, and marketing consultancy and software firms Genius Drive, Alinean, and Interpose; a Managing VP of analyst firm Gartner; chief evangelist and sales enablement expert for Mediafly where he was the founder of the Evolved Selling Institute; and host of the popular revenue and sales enablement podcast, Evolved Selling.

Tom lives in the Flatiron District in New York City and Winter Park, Florida. You can find him most days writing from one of the local coffee shops, working out, spinning at a local cycle studio, or jamming as a keyboard player with his band Rock Mobster.

Chapter 1

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

TOM + JUDY



The Meeting

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE I SAW THE TRUTH AS IT IS SET INTO SONG BY SO MANY POETS, PROCLAIMED AS THE FINAL WISDOM BY SO MANY THINKERS. THE TRUTH—THAT LOVE IS THE ULTIMATE AND HIGHEST GOAL TO WHICH MAN CAN ASPIRE. THEN I GRASPED THE MEANING OF THE GREATEST SECRET THAT HUMAN POETRY AND HUMAN THOUGHT AND BELIEF HAVE TO IMPART: THE SALVATION OF MAN IS THROUGH LOVE AND IN LOVE. —VIKTOR E. FRANKL, *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*¹

On a sunny October day in 2017, Tom's family's dear friend and kids' preschool school leader, Dr. Kristin Milson, breathed a tearful prayer to welcome everyone to Judy's Celebration of Life. Tom took the stage next, before a packed room of 300 neighbors, friends, and schoolmates.

Judy had lived her life by the mantra: "A life serving others is a life well lived," and the room was full of those she had befriended and helped: other moms, neighbors, and especially those afflicted with cancer.

Tom had spoken before much larger crowds in his business, but this was completely different. The community, family members, and especially his daughters were relying on him. He had to set the tone for this goodbye to his beautiful bride.

He began where it all started:

Before the arrival of their beautiful daughters, Sophia and Alaina. Before their home in Winter Park. Before creating their business Alinean together. Before cross-country and soccer. Before great vacations in Harbor Springs and Boulder and their

1 Viktor E. Frankl, Harold S. Kushner, and William J. Winslade, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006).

camp in Maine. Before school at All Saints, Park Maitland, and Trinity Prep.

Tom called Judy.

“Hello, Judy? This is Tom. Our friend Jan said that we should connect.” An incredible journey can begin with just a simple call and a few words. For Tom, it was just in time.

He had just started his first company, jumping headfirst into the deep end. He was also recovering from a broken relationship, and really struggling to make meaningful connections with women again. In that moment, on that call, Judy was a breath of fresh air.

They talked for a really long time: About her new job at Disney as an Imagineer. About her digital marketing for the new Celebration development and the Disney Cruise Line launch. She had brains, talent, and dreams. Tom was instantly entranced.

After about a half hour of captivating conversation, he commented: “This blind date stuff is really awkward, huh?” Complete silence. When that friend told Tom to call Judy, she apparently neglected to tell Judy. Judy thought Tom was looking for a digital marketer position. She thought this had been a job interview, not one of romantic interest!

Crap! No wonder the conversation had gone so well!

Tom broke the awkward silence: “Sorry, I didn’t mean to catch you by surprise. I thought this was a great conversation, and if you’d like to continue, I’d really like to meet you. Here’s my number. Give me a call.” *Suave, huh?*

Luckily, Judy had just left a long relationship herself. She had moved back to Florida and had a new job, a new apartment, and apparently a new sense of adventure. Even though she had determined to never go on a blind date, she too had enjoyed their conversation and was looking for meaningful connection. With a little encouragement from her friends, and one or two glasses of wine later, she decided to call Tom back.

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A few days later, Tom waited anxiously, grabbing an outside table at Pannulo's Italian restaurant so he couldn't miss her—and she couldn't dodge him! This was before social media platforms and dating apps, so they had absolutely no idea what the other looked like except for a description shared by their mutual friend, who unfortunately didn't have a photo of either one.

Judy walked up and time stopped.

Ripped acid-washed jeans and a tight peach sweater. Long auburn hair, and best of all, that great big smile. Before you even knew her, that smile communicated Michigan wholesomeness and a heart full of kindness and giving. She reminded Tom of Melissa Gilbert from *Little House on the Prairie* series, but a grown-up, no pigtails version.

She was brand new, but familiar. Confident, she was not afraid to order garlic-laden *penne tufo* on a first date. Most of all, Judy felt like “home” to Tom. Comfortable in her own skin, she made those around her feel the same way as she listened attentively and seemed to truly care as Tom spoke.

What did she think of him? Later, Judy often reminded Tom about this first date: the obnoxious wraparound Oakley and Guido gold rope necklace Tom was wearing. She had confided to their mutual friend that Tom was a little “too nice.” *Can you believe that?*

However, in the end, somehow Tom got her to look past all that. Before you knew it, their lives were entwined.

It was during a long walk, talking art and architecture, when Tom knew she was the one. He was head over heels in love. Their first house was on Lake Copeland in that same neighborhood, Delaney Park. Their first puppy, Software. After selling their first company, they would sail away into the sunset on their sailboat, Downtime.

Pretty soon after that first walk, they were floating on a cloud at the top of the Citrus Club in their first dance as husband and wife. And what a dance it was.

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Tom wrote this poem for Judy and read it aloud to all those gathered to celebrate their wedding. He can still clearly remember how beautiful she looked that day.

Time without Memory

The world I dream of has no memory, only promise.

*Memory, the secretary of time, lasts only one day,
Before being blindly obscured by each night's repose.
Who am I, where did I come from, where have I been?
All in a journal next to my bed, have I logged my story.*

Each morning I read the testament to a life well-lived, but do not know firsthand.

*There she is. That smile, those eyes
that I have only read about.*

*A fairytale princess come to life
from the pages of my own writings.*

*She is exploring her own story again today and has found me where I
was left.*

We embrace in a passionate kiss.

*Timidly in the beginning, for although many in time, the first in our
minds,*

*It grows to a numbing passion,
like only a first kiss can.*

*Unencumbered by a long life of greetings and farewells, of love's battles
won and lost.*

*There is time enough to reacquaint,
to affirm our feelings in native dance,*

To quench the passionate fires in our souls.

*But not nearly the time to take for granted
the caring and commitment.*

To not realize the beauty.

*For renewed every day are the first fantasies,
hopes and desires.*

Time without memory.

For this is the world I dream of.

I dream.

My Love Story: A Home with a Heart

LOVE IS PATIENT, LOVE IS KIND. IT DOES NOT ENVY, IT DOES NOT BOAST, IT IS NOT PROUD. IT DOES NOT DISHONOR OTHERS, IT IS NOT SELF-SEEKING, IT IS NOT EASILY ANGERED, IT KEEPS NO RECORD OF WRONGS. LOVE DOES NOT DELIGHT IN EVIL BUT REJOICES WITH THE TRUTH. IT ALWAYS PROTECTS, ALWAYS TRUSTS, ALWAYS HOPES, ALWAYS PERSEVERES. LOVE NEVER FAILS. (1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-8A)



Equal parts passion and adventure, there was nothing Tom and Judy couldn't do together. It wasn't perfect, but they were deeply committed. Since they married later in life, they wasted no time trying to grow their family. Tom didn't make this easy with the constant traveling his business demanded.

Before flying back home one weekend, Judy told him, "We need to talk." Tom knew she was unhappy about the little time they had together, so he was not expecting this conversation to be a pleasant one.

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They grabbed a casual lunch, and Judy said, “It’s time to talk.” Taking a deep breath, she pushed something toward Tom on the table.

Instead of a painful discussion, she had joyful news. Tom looked down at a positive pregnancy test. The family they had both talked about since the earliest days of their relationship was becoming a reality. Before too long, and after twenty-four hours of labor, in which Judy wanted Tom out of her face and nearly bit his nose off, they were blessed with their daughter, Sophia.

Hand in hand around this time, they bought a small office and started a new business. Judy ran marketing and operations, and Tom handled the product, sales, and service. From the beginning, Judy was Tom’s collaborator, confidant, and complement.

They both wanted a Spanish Colonial lakefront house. Blessed in business, they bought a vacant lot with a beautiful sunset view. Judy’s passion for architecture and design was one of the first things Tom loved about her, and now she finally had a blank canvas for creation. Judy began designing an absolute masterpiece.

Their original home sold quickly, so they moved into a small rental, not knowing that those “temporary” confines would be their home for three years of design and construction. That wasn’t the only surprise. They also welcomed a second daughter, Alaina, into the world.

Tom gave this poem to Judy the day he told her he loved her for the first time.

No Going Back

*When I tell you I will be trembling,
In trepidation and delight.*

The words need to be spoken.

*They have formed an emotional tidal wave in my heart,
Though my head doubts the intelligence
of their consequence.
I still know that the feelings are true.*

*I imagine sounds and syllables moving through the air.
Words resonating in the night.*

*Never to be retracted. It is too late.
The doubts will be lifted and
you will know exactly how I feel.*

*What will you do?
Run and hide, retreat inside,
Speak with silence, respond in kind?*

*"I love you," he softly says.
"I love you too," her heartfelt response.
There is no going back.*

*There are some souls that are entangled through several lifetimes,
through space and time. Judy and Tom were like that. Tom tried to
capture this dance with these words.*

Unbroken Circle

*You were someone else the last time our eyes met.
An angel in heaven. It was you. I touched your soul.*

*Or was it your tears? My last breath, holding hands.
In faith. In love. In hope.*

*Or a hateful slap. A promise broken,
shattered in the dark.
Or another. A look back as I walked away.
Or a forgotten word, I never knew I didn't say.*

Could it be this is a first hello, or the last goodbye?

*All paths together we take.
This time, which is the one?*

Gone Too Soon: Losing My Beautiful Bride, a Little at a Time

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE, FOR RICHER, FOR POORER, IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH, TO LOVE AND TO CHERISH... (TRADITIONAL WEDDING VOWS)

TO LOVE AT ALL IS TO BE VULNERABLE. LOVE ANYTHING, AND YOUR HEART WILL CERTAINLY BE WRUNG AND POSSIBLY BROKEN. —C.S. LEWIS, *THE FOUR LOVES*²



“The world is our oyster” defined their first ten years. When you are blessed so much, it is easy to take it for granted.

The next ten years? A trial of sickness and recovery. A grind of rinse and repeat.

Soon after their youngest was born, Judy started to suffer from peripheral nerve issues and chronic fatigue. Sleep

2 Clive S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Collins, 1982).

deprivation from running after a toddler and caring for a newborn? This mystery illness took much of her energy just when their family needed it most. They pursued different tests, acupuncture, and holistic healing—all to no avail.

One of the doctors finally ordered an MRI. It revealed what Judy had been trying to tell Tom from the first day they met: her brain was big. So big in fact that it didn't fit completely in her skull. She had a Chiari Malformation. Literally, the lower portion of her brain protruded out of the hole in the base of her skull. This pressing against her spine caused discomfort and fatigue now, but could worsen to paralysis or death.

Brain surgery was in order. The base of her skull needed to be shaved away to make room. With the muscles of her neck moved out of the way, Judy was literally a bobblehead post-surgery. Her sister, Jean, came to the rescue, staying by her side for the next two weeks. This became a blessed pattern that would unfortunately need to be repeated.

Breast cancer came next. A small lump was successfully removed just after her fortieth birthday. Minor and successful. Judy would later recount the doctors wanting her to go on estrogen blockers to help prevent recurrence, but she didn't. She didn't want to go into menopause fifteen years early, and who could blame her? However, this became a source of deep regret later.

A few years passed and Judy and Tom and family were in one of their favorite places to escape the Florida summer heat: Colorado. They were getting their "mountain on" and spending the summer in Boulder, visiting Tom's mentor Dan, enjoying Boulder Creek, and hiking every day with the girls. They loved it there so much that somehow Tom convinced Judy of starting a new adventure. Before they left, they made an offer on an incredible mid-century modern, just steps up from vibrant downtown Pearl Street, and also made a call to their

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favorite Florida realtor to ready their home there for listing when they returned.

Unfortunately, the Boulder move wouldn't come to fruition. Just before leaving for this trip, Judy had her annual follow-up visit. Her radiologist recognized Judy's name and spent a little longer looking at the images. He met with them on their return with bad news. Tom remembers it like it was yesterday. A double mastectomy soon followed. A stage 3b diagnosis led to many months of radiation and chemo.

Judy's sister, Jean, was there again when it mattered most. Judy had an incredible inner circle of other breast cancer survivors surrounding her through the trauma, recovery, sickness, and hair loss. Wendy and Suzy had both been diagnosed around the same time; they provided support and shared the nightmare. There was also a broader group of moms affectionately known as Judy's Village. They blessed Judy and Tom greatly. Angels all.

Five years later, Judy and Tom were heading to Camp Huckins in New Hampshire to drop off their oldest at summer camp. Judy's hair had grown back, and their girls were maturing under Judy's incredible example and guidance. Tom was in Boston on business, and picked them up from the airport to make their way north for a short vacation in Maine before they dropped off Sophia in the White Mountains. As they drove, Judy asked why the highway signs looked so odd. Why were they double? She had vision and balance issues the whole trip.

Their primary physician and friend Tracy immediately ordered a brain scan, taking nothing for granted based on Judy's history. A day later, Tracy was waiting for them in their driveway when they returned home from the office. She sat them down inside and delivered the results. The news was devastating. A glioblastoma brain tumor. A GBM in Judy's mid-brain on her pineal gland. A completely different cancer. After five years, they thought they'd be in the clear. Tom certainly thought so.

The brain tumor was inoperable. It was pressing on Judy's ocular nerve even more now, and she wore an eye patch at all times. Her balance deteriorated soon after as the tumor grew, and especially through the radiation treatment. Judy struggled to walk, and eventually used a walker just to make it across the room. During a walk down to their dock on the lake one day, Judy collapsed, and they could barely get her back up to the house. Just forty-seven and suffering greatly, they needed another miracle.

And somehow, they got one. Radiation and chemo were enough to halt and then shrink the tumor. After some time, Judy was able to walk and function again. The girls had their mom back.

However, everything was not back to normal. Judy had significant trouble sleeping and binge-watched *Breaking Bad* and other movies all night long. Her pituitary gland and her source of melatonin had been compromised with the tumor and treatments, so her sleep-wake cycles and circadian rhythms were no longer the same. Through each cycle of sickness and recovery, Tom and the girls were blessed to have Judy with them still, but less of her returned. They were losing her a piece at a time.

Knowing their time might be limited, Tom and Judy booked a magical Christmas cruise in Europe: Budapest to Munich for just the two of them. This getaway was a long time coming, a renewal of their relationship. Afterward, they had the best family Christmas ever. Soon after that, they celebrated Judy's fiftieth birthday with a surprise party. Another magical evening.

Over the next few months, they sold their family home and downsized to make things more manageable. Settled, but in need of a break, they took a great family trip to the Florida Keys, and then headed north to drop both kids off at Camp Huckins in Maine once again. During a bike ride in

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Kennebunkport, Judy got nauseous and struggled with balance and vision issues which continued throughout their time away.

Returning, they ordered up more tests, and the worst was confirmed. Tom had thought, based on the overwhelmingly positive response to prior treatment, that if the brain tumor came back, they could just “zap” it some more. But cancer doesn’t work that way. Stop it in one place, and it can just reappear elsewhere. That’s what it did.

The cancer spread to her spinal fluid. Additional chemo was ordered, and another painful battle began. Judy was a fighter. She wanted to be there to see our girls (now seventeen and fourteen) reach some critical milestones. Again, her sister was by her side, and Judy’s Village rallied.

A hospital battle unfortunately turned into hospice care over the next three months.

After celebrating their nineteenth wedding anniversary, Tom and Judy ordered in from the Italian restaurant where they had that blind date way back when, and danced to their wedding song, “Just the Way You Are.” Judy was able to celebrate their oldest daughter’s eighteenth birthday with long hugs and incredible love.

Judy took her last breath in Tom’s arms three days later.

This poem was written for Judy’s Celebration of Life ceremony.

To See You Again

*There’s a hole where my heart used to be
Where the rain seeps in and drowns my will to live*

*Falling inside to heal, confident of the strength I’ll gain
Only to find weakness is all that remains*

*And so I cry, and try, knowing that real love never ends
Our love will be reborn*

*Another time, another space, another place
I will find you and we will love again.*

Widowers by the Numbers: Research on Grief and Loss

FOR MEN, HEALING COMES FROM RE-PARTNERING. IT IS PART OF THE PROCESS. STATISTICALLY, WIDOWERS MARRY IN TWO TO THREE YEARS BASED ON U.S. CENSUS BUREAU DATA. FOR WOMEN, THEY LIKE TO HEAL FIRST AND THEN RE-PARTNER. WOMEN REMARRY SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SIX TO SEVEN YEARS. BUT MEN HEAL DIFFERENTLY, AND RE-PARTNER MUCH SOONER AS A RESULT. —CAROLYN MOORE, FOUNDER OF MODERN WIDOWS CLUB

You are not alone. According to U.S. Census 2019, there are 3.6 million widowers in the U.S. alone, not counting those that are now remarried, which tends to happen rather quickly. The numbers also don't include those who have experienced the loss of their life partner, but weren't legally married. So overall, between 2-3% of the total U.S. population are widowers. In our own community, a widower's average age is fifty-seven which means many are still also working, raising children, and shepherding young adults.

In my own backyard in Central Florida, there are:

- Over 8,000 widowers in Orange County alone.
- Over 20,000 widowers in the greater Orlando metropolitan area.
- Over 250k widowers in the state.

Expanding this figure, we estimate that there are over 50 million widowers worldwide.

The Impact of Loss

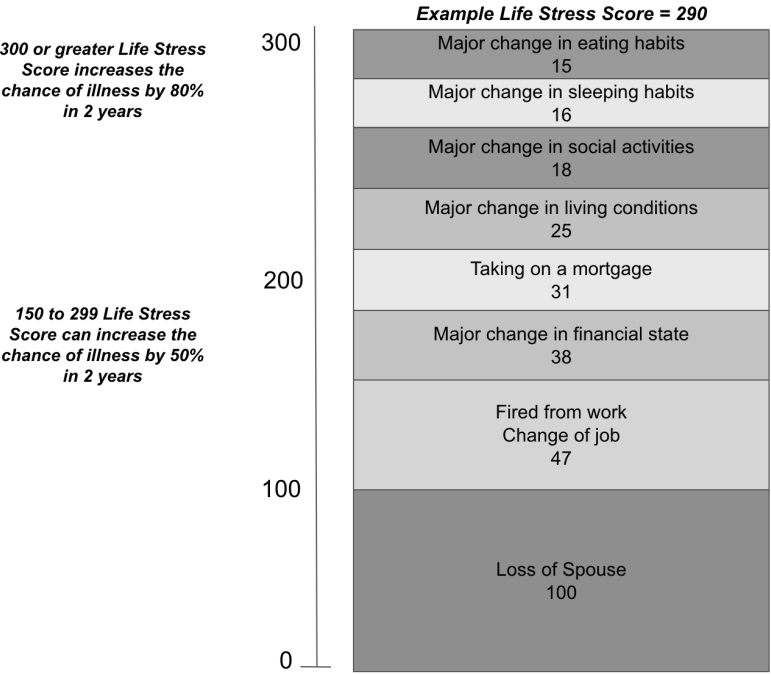
The loss of a wife is an incredibly stressful event, and for those who suffered through a long disease, the stress started long

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before the actual loss. And that stress continues for many years afterward.

Just how much impact does the loss of a spouse have? According to research, losing a spouse is number one, tipping the scales at 100 stress points, exceeding *all* other hurts and losses.³ Divorce rates at 73 points.⁴

The loss of a spouse doesn't just deal the stress of the direct loss. Many additional challenges manifest. These complications compound the grief and add up dramatically.



3 T. H. Holmes and R. H. Rahe, “The Social Readjustment Rating Scale from the Journal of Psychosomatic Research,” American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association), accessed February 28, 2023, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1968-03998-001>.

4 Ibid.

Stress points pile on top of one another. Many widowers struggle with career priorities which can lead to job changes or even loss, adding 47 more stress points. The loss of a late wife's income can pile on an additional 38 points. A move (or a major change) in living conditions (25), a loss of social activities (18), a disruption in sleeping habits (16), and altered eating habits (15) all compound.

According to the research, when the death of a spouse is combined with all these other factors, an accumulation of stressors can occur, impacting wellness and eventually causing disease.

Even in a previously healthy individual, the probability of illness increases 50% in two years when the stress points go past 150 points. Worse, when they exceed 300 points, there is an 80% chance of a health breakdown. Researchers have documented widowhood effects, confirming an increased risk in mortality and possible disability as well as, to no surprise, depressive symptoms.⁵

Consistently, the effects of losing a spouse are larger for widowers than widows, at least in the near term. Worse outcomes often occur for men because their wife was their "primary source of social support."⁶ Husbands rely on their wives for their social lives, care, and well-being. Without their partner, widowers often become isolated, don't eat well, or exercise self-care. They also tend to self-medicate and suffer from depression. The research is clear. Trauma and stress from the loss

5 G.R. Lee and A. DeMaris, "Widowhood, Gender, and Depression: A Longitudinal Analysis," ResearchGate (ResearchGate), accessed February 28, 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249630598_Widowhood_Gender_and_Depression_A_Longitudinal_Analysis.

6 Allison R. Sullivan and Andrew Fenelon, "Patterns of Widowhood Mortality," *The journals of gerontology. Series B, Psychological sciences and social sciences* (U.S. National Library of Medicine), accessed February 28, 2023, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24077660/>.

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of your spouse can impact wellness, and manifest in chronic illness.

In Tom's community, almost all widowers, especially within their first year, indicated that their grief greatly impaired their ability to work properly, and greatly affected their family life and social relationships. Additionally, these stressors were slow to recede: 40% indicated that their work, family life, and social relationships were *still challenged three years later*. Our widower's community named hopelessness as their top feeling, followed by overload, physical exhaustion, and loneliness.⁷

For example, Tom's once optimistic attitude for a bright future was replaced with doubt and hopelessness throughout Judy's illness and loss. Tom remembers the overload: trying to cope, planning a memorial while struggling with his business and finances, the kid's schedules, and the household—all of which Judy had managed. A persistent lack of sleep clouded that first year. Tom woke at the time of Judy's passing every night for months, which led to greater exhaustion.

Long before her passing, Tom's loneliness was extreme, which led him to get involved in a relationship after he lost her, way too soon.

When Tom and other widowers did their survey and looked at wellness traits, they wanted to know which ones took the biggest hits. They were confidence, self-image, and purpose.⁸

Men are the strength, the fixers, the solvers, but when it mattered most, none of them could save their wives. No one could have, but that doesn't mean they don't wear that robe of failure and shame anyway. Their once clear persona as husband,

7 That survey's list included Loneliness, Isolation, Fear, Indecision, Overload, Hopelessness, Depression, Anger, Physical Exhaustion, and Mental Exhaustion.

8 The options for current level of wellness choices were Happiness, Confidence, Positive self-image, Sense of purpose, Interest in self-care and health, Interest in interacting with others, and Interest in the future.

partner, and protector was now shattered, and their new purpose unclear, leaving them unsure.

Stress and this identity crisis impacted Tom's health. Over the course of Judy's illness, he had gained over sixty pounds, making him morbidly obese. A checkup soon after Judy's passing revealed extreme adrenal fatigue (long-term elevated cortisol levels took their toll). He was drinking heavily, especially during hospice. Tom worried he wouldn't be around to take care of his daughters. Chronic disease was in his future unless he got his shit together.

Tom needed to change his mind, body, and spirit in order to get there.

Twilight Prayer

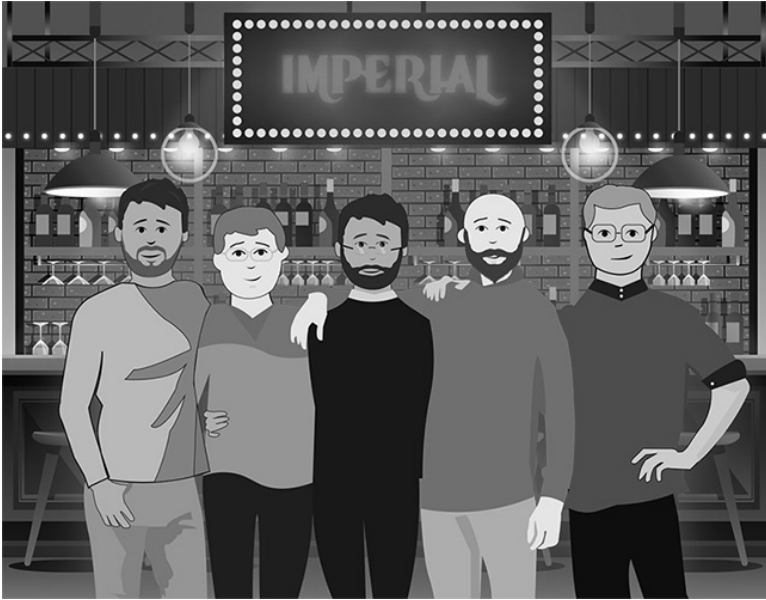
*Deliver, a safe place
From the nightmare, a dying breath*

*Find, these puzzle pieces scattered
Mend, this bleeding heart shattered
Lift, this prism of imperfection*

*Dance, a symphony,
Kaleidoscope into the twilight*

The First Meeting of the Widower's Club

COMFORT COMES FROM KNOWING THAT PEOPLE HAVE MADE THE SAME JOURNEY. AND SOLACE COMES FROM UNDERSTANDING HOW OTHERS HAVE LEARNED TO SING AGAIN. —HELEN STEINER RICE⁹



Tom dove into his dinner without praying as he had yet to make that a firm habit. Thankfully, Joey held out his hand, reminding the group that sharing a few stories, laughs, and a good meal weren't our only goals.

At a high top table, in the middle of an eclectic hometown restaurant, five men had gathered. Each had lost their beloved brides—some just a few weeks ago and others a few years prior. They grasped each other's hands. Somehow they knew that

9 Helen Steiner Rice, "Helen Steiner Rice Quote," A-Z Quotes, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/556657>.

going forward, despite all their struggles, they were not alone. They had each other.

Having called the group together, Tom led the prayer: “Lord, thank You for bringing this group together. None of us asked to be a part of this club, and none of us would volunteer, but this is the journey You chose for us. We are grateful for the brothers You have gathered together, so we know we are not alone in this journey. We can rely on each other, and find our way from the darkness of loss into the light of Your love. Jesus, please help us to honor our late wives tonight, sharing stories of love and family. As we reminisce, let us not just gaze backward, but also look forward to what You have planned for us. May we be better fathers to our grieving children, better leaders to those who rely on us in business, and better friends to all who have helped (and continue to help) us, even as they are grieving too. Most of all, Lord, help us grow the way You intend, finding our new selves and future purpose. Amen.”

Men are driven to solve problems, and seek to do so more naturally alone than as a group. They are strong and tough. They can handle it. They think like this: *We are, and we can.* But this journey is tough and they don’t have to stay alone.

There are many in the unfortunate widower’s brotherhood, who are going through the same loss, sadness, and trials, and have the same questions and concerns, and want to know “what’s next.” This prayer was appropriate for a very grieving heart.

As Tom started to work on his faith, he discovered that he was consistent in thanking God and asking for healing for those who were sick or suffering, but wasn’t good at asking God questions. The concept of an actual conversation with God was foreign. This poem was his way of reconciling that shortcoming, trying to get into a habit of asking questions as part of their relationship. The questions were those he thought he should have asked followed by his interpretation of the answers God gave in return. These questions

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reflected his inner turmoil over the loss of the three most important people in his life—his mentor Dan, his dad, and his wife all within a short period of time.

Questions for God

Ask for Direction?

A straight line, bends

Ask for Strength?

Three whisper breaths, death

Ask for Grace?

A meditative prayer, pose

Ask for Why?

Two little girls still, love

Ask for Clarity?

Lucid dreams, sober

Ask for Healing?

A brother's hand held, firm

Ask for Forgiveness?

Hearts tears, shed

Ask, am I Worthy?

Full Surrender, Yes

CHRISTOPHER + MARY

Carrying on Despite Loss

IT'S GOING TO GET BETTER. EVERY DAY CAN BE A
LITTLE BETTER. —CHRISTOPHER ICE



Christopher Ice lost his wife Mary when she was fifty-four years old after thirty-two years of marriage and a five-year battle with breast cancer. They had seven children. Chris served as the CEO and President of Ava Maria University and the CEO of Catholic Charities of Kansas City-St. Joseph while handling family duties and trying to hold it all together. This wasn't easy. This is Chris's story of loss, healing, and purpose.

A Great Partnership

Chris and Mary met in college on her very first day there. Chris was a junior, and she was a freshman. Mary's mother noticed that Chris was wearing a Nebraska shirt, and said, "Hey, there's somebody here from Nebraska!" (They were in Kansas at the time.) Within four years, they were married and were married happily for thirty-two years.

Initially Chris was an assistant college baseball coach, and later began a long career in commercial insurance, moving up through the executive ranks. Being blessed with seven children became a challenge when higher positions in the company required more travel. Mary stayed home and cared for the kids, which allowed Chris to move ahead in his career.

Over twenty years later, Chris decided he wanted to spend more time with his family, so he stepped back and took a job with a university out of Ohio, and helped them build a fundraising division. This led him to becoming the leader of Catholic Charities, and eventually the president of Ava Maria University. Chris and Mary had the normal ups and downs and challenges, but they had a great partnership.

"Why Her, God?"

Cancer changed everything. Fortunately, Chris had already stepped down from his executive career, so he was able to take care of Mary in a greater way than before. The initial diagnosis was a shock. Mary had no family history of cancer. Not her mother, her sister. No one. She was under fifty, there were no markers, she never took a contraceptive, she never had an abortion, she exercised every day, she ate healthy, and she was not overweight. Mary did none of the major things that can lead to breast cancer. She had none of them. Chris's biggest question was, "Why her, God?" But there was no time for that.

Instead, it was time to help Mary with the medical labyrinth stretching before her. So much stuff comes at the cancer patient, especially when it's brand new. Chris's employer gave him the time to really focus on finding the right care. It's so important for the patient to have help navigating everything. Chris had to recognize that this was the area he needed to oversee. It was overwhelming to Mary. She couldn't understand it. All she heard was the "C" word, and shut down.

Initially, Mary went through sixteen rounds of chemo in 2015. She had radiation. She had surgery, the whole works. They thought they were in the clear at the end of 2016, and lived "cancer free" for a couple more years before it came back. It was really unexpected. The cancer came back in April of 2019, and they said it was a different kind. They were immediately catapulted into triggered survival mode.

Chemo was tough throughout. Mary had never put anything unnatural in her body, so at first she vowed not to use it, but then realized that wasn't an option. The poison took a toll on her physical and mental health. Her first four treatments were nicknamed "the red devil" because they were so bad. Red devil chemo just turned everything red and made her very sick. After the next round of chemo, they discovered that the cancer was now in her brain and removed a golf ball-sized tumor.

Chris had accepted the position as a university president at the time that included relocation, and the doctors assured them that Mary was going to be fine. Two weeks after the move, she wasn't feeling well. She was admitted and tests showed cancer cells within her spinal and brain fluids. She passed away within two days, leaving her family in shock.

They all thought she was going to get through this, or at least get more chemo and gain some time. Three to six months, maybe longer. No one thought they only had two days. They hadn't unpacked a single box.

Grieving Requires Time

After Mary's death, Chris dove into work. It was the start of the global pandemic, and there was a lot of pressure to make decisions immediately regarding the university opening and the kids getting back to school. Everything was crazy and haphazard. After stepping off the plane from burying his wife in Nebraska, the Board of Directors was already asking if they were going to keep the campus open or not and making plans for the next semester. Decisions had to be made.

Since Chris was on a six-week bereavement leave, he made the decision then, on faith, to keep the campus open. They planned to do lessons in person (as well as virtually for the immuno-compromised, or the concerned professor or student). The pandemic's impact was relentless, requiring hundreds of new decisions. As a result, Chris really didn't have time to grieve the way he needed.

Grieving requires time. Some people take six months, while others take years to recover. Chris had to throw himself into work so quickly that he hadn't had any time. Instead, he was trying to deal with great loss while he fathered his two youngest girls still at home and ran an entire university during an unprecedented pandemic. Even though he had a lot of support from the local community, it was difficult at best. When he saw the continued decline of his girls in respect to their trauma, he began to look for a less stressful job. He was able to step away from the university in July of 2021.

A Firm Foundation

God was Chris's foundation for keeping it all together. He knew God really was the Superpower He claimed to be, and that he was nothing without Him, so Chris's faith was his guiding light. He trusted God as his Creator—the one who loved

him and his family. He trusted that their loss was meant to be, and had a purpose, even though he didn't know what it was. He trusted God's plan for mankind, firmly believing that his focus should be serving his family so they would be with Jesus in heaven. *That's where we're going to live in eternity*, he thought. *Our life here is just a speck of dust in the light of eternity.*

It's true that Mary got there much quicker than Chris would have desired, but once that happened, he chose to rely on God. Even though he didn't like the circumstances, he had to say, "Okay God, this is Your will." No one likes suffering, but that suffering helped Chris grow in a deep way. In the end, it caused him to completely reassess his life. Was he doing more for the university than his own family? Family was supposed to come first. Was his faith strong and was God first in his life? His daughters were young: eleven and fourteen at the time of Mary's passing. It was time to step back and help them—and his other children too. Just because they were older didn't mean they didn't need their dad too.

He found that each one of his children was in a different part of the grieving process. This continues. Two years after losing his mother, Chris's nineteen-year-old son commented, "Sometimes it only feels like she's been gone about five months." When he comes home from college, he has to reprocess things that maybe the girls had already gone through, or aren't needing to process at that time.

Grief is unpredictable. That's where faith played a significant role for Chris. One moment, you're fine and the next you glance out a window or at the TV and you're instantly drowning. Chris just kept praying and never stopped. His faith has been the anchor in the midst of the chaos.

Many years before, Chris had read Dr. James Dobson's book *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. The book was about why God doesn't step in and fix every problem and rescue us from every tragedy in life. He now recognized that reading that had

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prepared him to some extent in dealing with his loss. Much of life is about the decisions and choices we make, and God allows us complete freedom. He loves us so much that He lets us make our own choice—even if it is walking away from Him.

Failing and Remembering

So, Chris focused on his kids, trying to relate to them the best he could. He understood that his earthly fatherly role was important. It set the stage for how his kids would relate to their Father in heaven, and he knew that he was to give them the same freedom God gave him. When his kids got into trouble, he gave them advice, but he didn't force them to make the decisions he wanted them to make. His children had to learn to make decisions and deal with the consequences, for good or ill. Chris had watched some of his children suffer in that respect, but they were growing. God the Father allows us to do the same darn stuff, so we can grow too.

God lets us fail. He lets us love. He lets us go awry sometimes, so we can learn a lesson, so we can relate to our own kids or those around us. Chris's goal with his children was to give them a strong foundation when they were young, teaching them to maintain a prayer life and rely on God and Scripture. This is true for every faith. Parents can lay a firm foundation, and if a child strays, hopefully they will return. Some of Chris's children did come back to their faith in God. Possibly it was Mary's passing that was the catalyst for them to return to their Christian roots.

Chris also reminded his girls to not stop talking about Mom. He talks about her all the time, recalling the great memories, and laughing. It's important to speak about the one you think of so often. There is a thin veil between heaven and earth. The soul and the body are connected as one while we live on earth. When the body dies, our soul and spirit continue on,

and never stop, so Chris and his family honor Mary's memory. She continues to be a central part of who they are as a family, even today and especially on holidays.

Mary homeschooled all of the kids to a certain age, so she was a big part of their lives. They all have wonderful memories, especially on holidays, so they still include her in them today.

On her birthday, they prepare her favorite meal for the family, and then serve a dessert she would never eat. Mary didn't like sugar, so it's fun to laugh, knowing "Mom would never eat these brownies" as the whole family devours them anyway.

Mother's Day is more difficult, especially because everybody's celebrating their mothers. Chris's daughter was asked if she wanted to make something for her mom at school. That was hard. To help, Chris asked all the kids to send texts sharing a favorite Mom memory. This helped them celebrate her life the best they could.

When Chris took a long look at his life, he realized that the long illness had taken a physical toll as well. When Mary was ill, Chris had gained a lot of weight. His time had been dominated by work and hospital visits, so he'd eaten on the fly most of the time.

During the pandemic, Chris was often hiding out in Mary's room, lucky to have a doctor that allowed him to be with her. That meant he was eating the hospital food that came to her room. (The cafeteria was out too as Chris was locked in the room, so Mary shared her food if you can imagine that.)

Afterward, Chris started exercising and reading again to get his body and mind back in order. Working out, diet, and order and structure, along with counseling and faith were all key components to growing again. In the beginning, Chris focused on going to church, praying each day in the morning and the evening, and trusting God first. The physical and mental parts came later. At first, he was flooded with a lot of anxiety and stress from trying to balance so many things.

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People they knew served them meals for months. Everybody needs the benefits of such a community. Even though they'd only been there for a short time, people embraced them, wrapping their arms around Chris and his family. Today Chris is thirty pounds lighter, a good feeling. His girls are happier too because they see Dad being healthier, so they are less worried about being left alone.

Leadership through tragedy amidst all the fireworks of disease and loss was challenging. You still had to calmly make decisions and listen to the facts. Chris learned firsthand that while leadership took strength, it also took understanding that he wasn't on his own and needed to rely on God. Everyday, as bombs went off all around him and his family, he still had to decide whether to move his troops forward, hold them steady, or retreat. Many lives were at stake.

He learned to slow down as a result. He often thought of Winston Churchill, hiding out in the bunker and making decisions—not running out in front or standing on the front lines. It would have been stupid to expose the one making all the decisions like that. Instead, he stayed safe and made hard decisions as calmly as possible, even when London itself was under attack. Churchill was a great example of leadership through tragedy and turmoil. Chris did his best to make decisions thoughtfully, so they were not knee-jerk reactions.

Additionally, Chris was part of a group of six other men that walked with him through the whole tragedy. The men prayed and provided Chris with support. They called frequently, even setting up conference calls and meetings. Being in a men's group with these company leaders helped Chris reflect on his challenges and what to do about them. One of them had a wife who had cancer, so they talked together about some of the challenges he had gone through, and that helped guide Chris on his own journey.

Over time, Chris saw the light at the end of the tunnel. He knew in his heart that things were going to get better. Initially he walked in a dark cloud most of the time, but as he focused on the light in front of him, it lessened. He saw that there were people that wanted to help him and opened the door to them. This was important. When you're going through hard things, you sometimes don't want to be around people, but Chris learned to let them in, and that helped. They are showing forth the grace of God as they serve you. At some point in the future, it will be your time to be the servant and give. It helped Chris to receive their gifts and allow people to receive grace for their generosity.

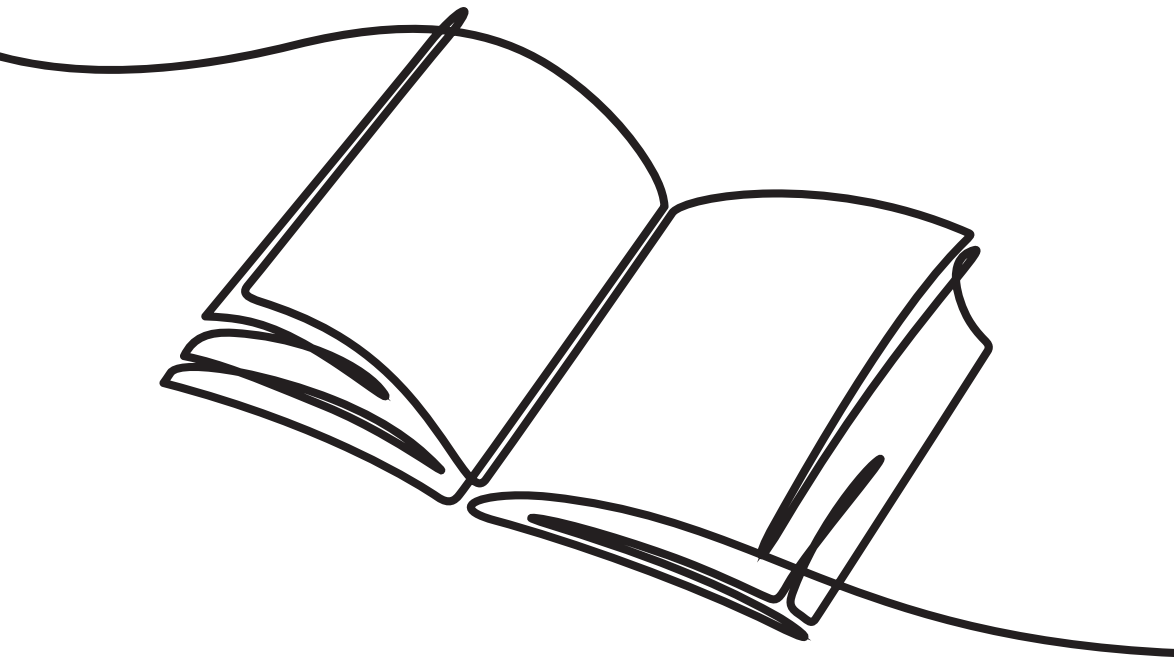
The Top 5 Wrong Ideas People Have about Widowers

- Widowers will shake it off and don't need help.
- A quiet widower is a healed widower.
- Widowers will grieve for a year and be fine after that.
- Widowers need to get "back in the saddle" as quickly as possible.
- A widower's grief will eventually fade away.



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