

A Young Widow's Journey

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"Til death do us part." Such a common phrase that we hear in many weddings. When you're marrying for the first time, and/or as a young adult, those words just glide by. You don't ever stop to think that they were really meant for you. Intellectually we know that we will all die. Emotionally, you are swept away with the joy of a new beginning with the person you love. We're not thinking about death.

It happens though. Sometimes through an illness. Sometimes it's because of an accident.

On August 12, 2002, I had just returned home from getting a haircut. I was gearing up to begin a new year of teaching. With five children aged 7-14, I had to make sure everyone was ready to start school off right. I was getting ready to make dinner, awaiting my husband and two of our children to return home. They were later than I expected. But four in the house was much quieter than all seven of us, so I enjoyed the ease of the evening.

Then the phone rang. As I stood speechless, my eldest son knew something was wrong. I struggled to comprehend the voice on the phone telling me that two of my children had been in a car accident and they were at Fairfax Hospital. They were both in serious condition, and the hospital needed to know if they could do some tests and perform surgery. I answered, "Of course. Whatever needs to be done." And then I asked about my husband. There was no record of him. He had not been transported to Fairfax, and they knew nothing of him.

Just then, a knock came to the door. I answered it and a Sheriff's deputy was standing there. He told me that my husband had been in an accident and was medivacked to Fairfax Hospital. I

said I was on the phone with them, and they had no record of him. Time stood still. All the thoughts that might race through your head, began to. What had happened? Where had it happened? How had it happened? Where was Mike? Was he alright? What would happen with the children? Who should I call? What do I tell the three children at home?

For what seemed like forever, the nurse on the phone, the deputy, and I waited for anyone to tell us where Mike was. The boys were being taken care of in one of the finest hospitals. I had no control of that. But who was taking care of Mike? Finally, it was communicated that Mike was at UVA Medical Hospital. I felt he was in good hands there.

And so begins my journey. I had two sons an hour away to the north. My husband was an hour away to the south. With five children, I had faced many times where I had to be in two places at once. Remarkably, a calmness came over me. I weighed my decision. I called my older brother who lived about 15 minutes from Fairfax Hospital. Since the boys were in surgery, I couldn't do much there, so I asked him to go to that hospital. I called a neighbor to take my three children who were still at home. And then I decided to go to UVA with the deputy. Long ago, Mike and I had made a pact that although we adored our children, we would put each other first. Since no one would or could tell me his specific condition, I needed to be with him.

In a frenzy, I had left the house without my wallet. We stopped at a local restaurant owned by a friend. I asked her to help me and she emptied her cash drawer and gave me the contents. As we drove to UVA, the miles whizzed by, but it took a lifetime to get there. When I arrived at UVA, I was taken to a room all by myself.

If you've ever watched any TV cop shows, doctor shows, or hospital shows, you know that a policeman at the door and a hospi-

tal waiting room by yourself, is not the place to be. As I sat in that room alone, I prayed. It was certainly not the first time I prayed along this journey. As a believer, I knew then and I know now that God was all I had to lean on, but my prayer was different at this point. I had been receiving phone calls from my brother telling me the boys were critical, but OK! I had spoken to my parents and in-laws, and they were all with the boys. They were all praying. As news spread throughout our small community, I knew everyone would be praying.

I sat alone, in the room, with just God. No, not just God...GOD! I knew I needed Him now more than any other time in my life. I talked to Him, asking if this was my "Til death do us part" moment. I actually asked God to give me Mike back as a whole, capable man, or to take him to heaven. Mike was a vibrant, active, energetic man. Unless he was watching a movie or favorite TV show, he was moving. His spirit was full of life and to

be anything less than that...well I told God that I did not think I had the strength to deal with it.

I either wanted him to walk out of the hospital with me or walk through the gates of heaven.

Shortly thereafter, three doctors came into the room and shared with me the trauma Mike had faced, and that he had died. What I know is he was crushed from the waist down. To know more than that wasn't necessary. I asked to



see him. As I looked at his perfect face, not a scratch on it, I recalled sweet memories that we had shared together. I thanked him for a life well-lived and five beautiful children. I chastised him for leaving me. We had another pact that I would

change all the diapers, and he would take care of the kids in their teen years. He didn't live up to that bargain.

I knew that Mike was on his way to heaven. Certainly not a perfect man, Mike did put God first in his life. He knew from where his blessings came, and he was proud to share that. Mike had many goals that he wanted to reach, but he always would say getting to heaven was the most important one. No more challenges to face, he was on his way to meet Jesus!

I, on the other hand, had a new leg on my journey. Knowing that I could do nothing more for Mike, I had to get to my sons. The deputy drove me North, to meet my brother. I will always be grateful for my brother. He was tasked with telling Mike's parents that he had died, as well as my parents and my two sons. He's such a kind, calm, wise man, and God chose the best person for that role.

The night was long. My sons had broken bones, a lacerated spleen, a fractured hip socket, and glass shards in their faces and hands. All these would be repaired over time. What could not be repaired was the loss of their father. No words could heal my five children. But God could.

This journey of ours has so much more to it than just this one day. There have been so many trials and missteps along the way. I relied on many people and things to help me along the journey. I tried very hard to keep God at the center and lean on Him for guidance. I continued to ask Him why this had happened. Why did you need to break up our marriage, our family, our home? Why did "Til death do us part" have to knock on my door? Why me? Why us? What did you need Mike so badly for? Was it more important than my and my children's needs? I was never angry with God, but I was persistent, and I just wanted answers.

His answers came when I chose to listen to Him and follow His guidance. Following are some strategies I had to help with my journey. Your journey may be similar to mine, but it will be different. As with anyone who will give you advice, use what feels right for you.

EMBRACE THE HELP

God sent me help. Along this journey, I've learned that God puts people in our lives to help us. They may offer a kind word, send a check to ease the burden, or do an odd job. They may bring you guidance and thoughtful wisdom. They may come in for awhile—days, months, years—help you out and then sneak away. Or they may park themselves near your heart and let you rely on them forever.

Whatever people God sends your way, embrace them. I read a book once that said we all really do want to reach out and help others in their time of need. To deny someone the chance to help you, doesn't allow them to do God's service. So, I encourage you to make a list of the things you need. Whether it is a listening ear, a ride to the doctor's, or having your yard mowed, etc. Keep it ongoing. Add to it, as new things pop up. When someone asks how they can help, go to your list. Give them something specific to do for you. Don't be prideful. There will come a day when you will want to give to others. Now is the time to receive God's service.

Don't be afraid to ASK for help. People may offer to assist, but you certainly can ask when you need something specific. Remember, ask and you shall receive. If not the first person you call, it will definitely be the last one you call!!! Just as you keep a list of the things you need help with, keep a list of the folks that say to call if you need something. I was very surprised how many ladies let me know that they were widows, too. They

were more than willing to share their number to call them “whenever”. It's not a club that anyone wants to join, but we are out here. Let people help you in your time of need.

SEEK OUT PROFESSIONALS

Seek help from professionals in your community. Before my sons were released from the hospital, I had set up a meeting with a grief counselor. I was fortunate to have him come to our home to meet with me and the children, as the two boys were in wheelchairs. I went to the grief program for adults that they offered. Dear friends came to my home to be with the children so I could attend. I looked into Hospice programs, as they usually offer grief programs. This journey led me to Spiritual Care Support Ministries! They support those dealing with grief. Although they are right in my own community, they offer Skype and other services, and online information. Check with your local hospital or doctors for these types of resources.

As the months and years moved on, I looked in to counseling. I had personal counseling. I took a course on teen counseling. We all did family counseling. Each child had individual counseling. SO MUCH COUNSELING! Sometimes it was through my church, hospice, or local counselors. I felt confused and unsure of my decisions. My family and friends did not always want to hear me talk about Mike again or hear about my struggles. A person who is unrelated to you emotionally can offer unbiased advice. They can help get you thinking in a different way and hopefully put you on a clearer path in your journey. I also had been told that a child goes through a new stage of grief, as they enter a new stage of development! With 5 kids, that was a revelation. In retrospect, I can say that did occur. My children needed help processing their feelings, and I needed help to know how to deal with them.

I also wanted my children to know that counseling was okay. I



knew that one day they would be at college or out in the world and grief would hit them. I wanted them to feel that seeking out a counselor was a smart thing to do. There are some who believe going to a counselor is only for the weak; people who can't handle things. I honestly believe you have

strength if you can admit that you are struggling and need help. It takes great courage to share your hardships, doubts, fears and difficulties with a counselor or in group therapy. It's easy to wallow day after day and keep it bottled inside. We all know that is not healthy, though. To share your feelings and pain leaves you vulnerable. That takes great strength.

ALLOW YOURSELF TO GRIEVE

When you have children, you think you can't always feel the way you'd like. But you are allowed to feel any way that you do! The challenge comes with the way you react. Truly we don't have control of anything that happens. What we do control is how we react. I believe that it is okay to feel sad, angry, upset, frustrated, emotional, confused, bitter, weak, etc. You just have to think about how you play that out. If you are inconsolable, maybe stepping outside or sitting in the car so you are out of earshot, will be less scary for your children. If you are angry, punching a pillow or yelling while in the shower might work. Try to think creatively!

Was I always careful to do this? Certainly not. Mistakes were made, things were said that shouldn't have been. I yelled, I misspoke. I would do lots of things differently, but I never tried

to hide my feelings from my kids. I wanted them to know that feelings are real, and if I could have them, they could, too. I also made it a point to apologize if I said or did something I shouldn't have. Most children don't want to see their only parent in pain. So talking to them about your feelings, if appropriate, helps them sort things out as well.

Grief is sticky. It's not neat. There is no plan or guideline. It affects everything you do and say. Allow yourself alone time if you need it. Allow yourself a day of self-pity. On those horrible, terrible days, just do the next thing. Whatever that may be--- washing the dishes, taking a shower, paying a bill. Try not to beat yourself up about how you feel and what you do. If you're struggling, look to God for calm and guidance.

ALLOW YOUR CHILDREN THEIR NORMAL WORLD

There is a lot to be said for what is normal. There is no doubt that when Mike died, our world was turned upside down. Having your dad die when you're a child, is not normal. So much became so different, so quickly. What I tried to do, was to keep the things in my children's lives as normal as possible. With help from a huge number of friends, I let my children continue with school clubs, church school, softball, football, baseball, basketball, and Scouts. Whatever they were involved with when their dad died, I worked hard to keep them in that. I especially wanted the example of males in their life to continue. I looked for good male role models for them. Their uncles, coaches, teachers, and leaders in the community helped show them how a man should act. I could not have done this without the help of so many people in my community. I did ask people to help with rides to practice, games, events, etc. As I did when their dad was alive, I also made it a point to be at every game they played. This was important to me. I felt it gave them that sense of normalcy and continuity.

I did not live in fear of losing them. Sometimes we can become protective of our children when we lose a spouse. That just makes sense. I did not want to burden my children with that. I taught them to make good choices and be responsible. Mike died two miles from our home. Anyone can leave us at anytime. I allowed my children to go away for the weekend with friends, fly on an airplane to Florida for Spring Training, and drive when they were ready. I refused to let them grow up being fearful. If we have God in our lives, we are to believe that he is the great protector. I don't know his plan, but I do know he only wants the best for us. Life is to be lived responsibly and with joy. My children needed to have some sense of that.

I also refused to let them see me go through life angry and bitter. “Til death do us part” was not expected at the age of 43. For God's reasons, it was time for Mike to go to heaven. Not my plan, but God's. I had to accept that. I had to accept the fact that my children and I were left here to live. Moving through life angry at the boy who drove his car into Mike's, served no purpose. Bitter about being left a widow with 5 children gave me no joy. I believe that God has a purpose for me, and I want to move through my purposeful journey with joy. I want my children to see that.

FACE THE IMPORTANT DAYS HEAD-ON

After Mike died, our first holiday was Halloween. Being a big kid himself, this was always so much fun. Then there was Thanksgiving and, of course, Christmas. There are so many family traditions and events that occur around holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. Then you add in the 1 month of his death, 2 months, etc. It is endless. I found along the way that it was always the anticipation of the day or event that was the hardest. The day—Oct. 31, Dec. 25—came and went. But the wondering, the planning, the worrying, how would I feel, what

would people say, could I handle it..... that was the anxious part. Once the day came, it went. Not too difficult.

You, of course, will move through your individual special family days in your own way. Whatever you need to do, is fine. If you need and want other people around, have that. If you want low-key quiet, do that. If you want to go away, plan a new memory, do something you always wanted to do, do that. As a hunter, Mike had shot several bucks and they graced our walls. I always wanted to put Santa hats on them. Nope. That wasn't allowed. Well, now I do. In fact, I leave those hats on all year! This is now about how you feel and what's best for your children.

Depending on their age, you may want to involve them in your decisions. Like me, I hope you find the actual “day” to go just fine.

FIND A NEW PURPOSE

One day along the journey, I no longer asked God, “Why me?” I began to ask, “Why NOT me?” God could have chosen anybody's husband to die. He chose mine which means that God chose ME! Now what was I to do with that? That's an awesome responsibility to be chosen by God. Understand that this has not been a journey that I would wish on anyone. No family member, no friend, no enemy. It has been a painful, endless struggle. When you think you are over it, grief rears its ugly head and the pain and tears flow again. The love you shared is measured by the pain you feel.

Through it all though, I knew that God had a purpose for me. So, I volunteer with Spiritual Care Support Ministries to let others know that there is hope. Through God's help, there is a better tomorrow. There is a day when laughter will be heard, and pain

will be less. Love can enter your life again and memories of the past will be sweet and heartfelt. Life can be joyful again.

My purpose is to show others that through my trust and faith in God, His plan is good.

I wasn't ready to lose Mike. I didn't expect to be a single mother of five, but God equipped me with all the tools I need. I just need to accept the help He sends to me, pray for His guidance, and listen to His word. In the end, the glory is given to Him for this journey.

In conclusion, I'd like you to know that my children are now ages 24-30. Two are happily married. Four have graduated college. The fifth served our nation in the Army for 6 years and is pursuing his degree now. They live in Los Angeles, Dallas, Palm Beach, Arlington, and Alexandria. They are employed, healthy, and happy.

I am celebrating five years of marriage this year. I continue to teach 2nd grade and enjoy my quiet life in the country...in the same home that Mike was providential about buying 25 years ago.

The journey is long. The struggle is real. With faith in God, there is always hope for a joyful, purposeful tomorrow. God bless you.

About Spiritual Care Support Ministries

Spiritual Care Support Ministries (SCSM) provides faith-based education, training, counseling and spiritual support for those who are ill, dying, grieving, experiencing personal loss, and for those who journey with them. It is our mission to provide compassionate care and emotional healing for individuals and families struggling with loss and pain, whether from illness or the death of a loved one, a chronic condition, divorce, or other personal losses. Our counseling services, spiritual retreats, inspirational studies, and support groups give people strength, hope, and enduring faith during many of the most difficult times of their lives. We are proud to provide this invaluable support, whether it is through dedicated individualized counseling services, community events, spiritual guidance or simply lending a listening ear.

Our support is strengthened through a faith-based perspective with open dialogues. We understand that each person's beliefs and the way in which we each mourn and heal is different; yet each person needs encouragement and compassion as they work through their feelings. Through the care and professional assistance of our more than 30 counselors and facilitators and more than 100 volunteers, Spiritual Care Support Ministries provides these services free of charge to those in need.

SCSM is a non-denominational, non-profit 501c3 organization. Our vision is to establish a local, national and international resource center for all to take part in when they need it most. SCSM provides training and support across Virginia, and also assists individuals and families nationwide through remote counseling via phone or the internet, informational resources, inspirational messages and more.

Spiritual Care Support Ministries

MISSION STATEMENT

Spiritual Care Support Ministries provides support, education and a Biblical perspective to those who are ill, dying, grieving and experiencing personal loss, and to those who journey with them.

VISION

To establish a local, national and international resource center to provide ministry, training and a retreat for those who are ill, dying, grieving and experiencing personal loss, and to those who journey with them.

VALUES

God's Word

Prayer

Value Every Human Life

Integrity

Confidentiality

Excellence in Everything We Do



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