

COPING

WHEN YOUR SPOUSE DIES

MEDARD LAZ

FOREWORD BY EMELIA ALBERICO,
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FOREWORD



The journey through pain is a solitary one, but traveling the path with a map can be a clearer, more defined way through the pain than journeying blindly. Following the pastoral road in this book will help both the newly widowed as well as those widowed for a longer period of time.

Many grieving people hold the illusion that the way to feeling better after a significant loss is endless and the way to being whole is beyond endless. For all of us who grieve, Father Medard Laz gives constructive ways of putting the pain behind. With his help we can identify the various stages of grief. Once we do this, we are gifted with the knowledge that the feelings experienced on this painful journey are normal.

The concrete examples given here by those who have experienced the trauma of being widowed are helpful signposts along the lonely journey. Med's pertinent questions after each chapter not only make the journey less fearful but also provide powerful tools that clearly define ways of healing.

This book, then, is the map that we who have lost a loved one have searched for in our desperate attempt to stop our agony. Med holds out his hand to help people in pain. He encourages us to stay with the pain through our jagged journey. By taking his hand and following the self-help steps in this book, we are able to reach beyond the darkness to new birth, hope, love, and peace.

Emelia Alberico,
Executive Director
The Beginning Experience

The Beginning Experience is an international peer ministry for separated, divorced, and widowed persons and their children. It is a process that facilitates the resolution of grief, promotes healing, and helps free people to live and love themselves, others, and God. The Beginning Experience Weekend is the foundation of the ministry, with support programs and outreach to youth as integral to the ministry. For more information on the Beginning Experience Weekend, contact the Beginning Experience International Ministry Center, 1657 Commerce Drive, South Bend, IN 46628; toll-free phone 866-610-8877; fax 574-283-0287; www.beginningexperience.org. E-mail us through the Contact Us page on our Web site.

INTRODUCTION



Death is a reality that few people care to talk about. When death strikes their spouse, they feel totally helpless. There are so many questions and so few answers—if any.

This book does not try to solve the problems that you face as a widow or widower, but it attempts to deal with the central issues that are present in your life after the death of your spouse. It is intended to provide support in your suffering, to make you aware that you are not isolated in what you are feeling. You are intimately involved in one of life's greatest mysteries, that of death and resurrection. You cannot bring back your spouse or the days of your marriage, but *you* can be resurrected to a new life.

You know that death and resurrection are basic to life. Both physically and spiritually, your emphasis must now be on resurrection. After you have experienced the agony caused by the death of your spouse, you may be tempted,

for example, to withdraw from all social contacts. But this is not giving God or yourself a second chance.

This book will help you to *go through the pain* of the death and find resurrection or new life. You, of course, want to run from the pain and avoid the grief of your situation. The tendency is to bury your feelings rather than have others see you crying or depressed. In the long run this only leads to physical and emotional illness. Why bury your feelings or avoid expressing them? Going through the stages of your grief rather than steering clear of the agony will eventually help you to a new beginning in life. You will, in time, discover that rebirth is well worth the price of your pain.

By dealing primarily with feelings common to men and women, this book is intended for both widows and widowers. Its aim is to be a spiritual and an emotional support. As an individual, you can use it for personal healing; as a member of a small support group, you can utilize it as a resource book for your discussions.

To further aid you in the healing process, each chapter concludes with a set of questions. Your answers should be written down. In this way you will begin to see yourself more clearly, and you will provide yourself with definite data for your discussions with others.

A special note of thanks to those widows and widowers in the Beginning Experience who have shared their grief and their rebirth with me. They have made possible the telling of this Easter story.

I LIFE IS CHANGED— NOT ENDED



I was not prepared. When I heard the word, ‘dead,’ my whole body went numb. This could not be happening to me.”

No matter how sudden or forewarned, no matter your age, the depth of your faith, or your state in life—you are not prepared for the shock and the finality of the death of your spouse. You cannot anticipate the emotional trauma that his or her death brings to you. You seem so helplessly alone, even though many people are there to lend you support. Grief is your constant companion. Your whole being quakes with fear and disbelief. Nothing and no one can miraculously take away your suffering. You must go through it step-by-step, heartache by heartache.

Why? Why? Why? pounds away constantly in your head like an air hammer. You search for answers. From first grade on, you have been programmed toward finding answers. Death—its unanswered questions and resulting void—has no answers. Death is and always will be a mystery. It will never

be solved until you yourself can look back at life from the eternal beyond. Now, you will always see “through a glass darkly,” for human eyes are able to see no further.

When your spouse dies, it is tantamount to taking a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, throwing it into the air, and having the pieces land everywhere. The death of your spouse reduces your life to scattered pieces. With the devastation you feel, it will take months just to find and get the four corners of your life back into place. Every piece, every aspect of your life needs to be reexamined.

Your main difficulty in figuring out where all the pieces fit is that there is no picture to guide you. With a regular jigsaw puzzle there is a picture on the box to let you see what you are assembling. You can collect complementary colors and shapes to aid in the piecing together. Death has no color or shape. There is no picture to guide your work; the pieces themselves are empty and blank. You are not sure what your new life is supposed to look like. In many respects, you don’t care; your pain is so great.

One reason for all of this is *shattered dreams*. The most shocking aspect of the death of your spouse is that there are no more tomorrows for the two of you; no horizons to plan or to talk about over coffee. Arguments and difficulties were often overcome because there was hope in tomorrow. Without another day, where is the hope?

So much of your marriage hinged on those dreams of tomorrow. Dreams made permanent commitments possible.

“Once the children are gone...” “After the home is paid off...” “When we go to Hawaii...” “Once I retire...” These were all such shining hopes which made your days seem less troublesome than they were. Take away the dreams and the one person with whom you have shared them, and life has little or no meaning.

In losing your spouse, you have a built-in sense of being cut off. You have to decide who God is calling you to be toward the middle or the end of your life—a struggle similar to that in your earlier years. God is always calling you toward a deeper life, a richer knowledge of yourself. He never beckons you into self-pity or self-indulgence, into total grieving or licking your wounds in life. God is calling you to the acceptance of your pain as glory, to death as birth, to a greater expectancy of what life means to you and who *you are still becoming*. This is never-ending, because it goes even beyond the grave into a new resurrected life.

On your journey through the early stages of one of life’s darkest experiences, there are four things you can do to help yourself: (1) accept the reality; (2) express your emotions; (3) find support in others; and (4) keep a journal.

ACCEPT REALITY

Facing the finality of death brings on an emotional tidal wave. Whether an illness of years prepared you for the moment or the death was totally unexpected—you went into

shock when death arrived. You have never been more alone than at the time of the announcement. *Why me? What have either of us done to deserve this? Gone...gone!...I'll never make it alone...gone!* The words hit you like a fast-moving train. With your head, your heart, and your whole being pounding, you are lucky to be breathing, to be alive yourself.

As much as you try to fight the finality of death's call, the arrangements that need to be made quickly bring your senses back to a partial awareness. Before you lies the stark reality—the body. In order to lay your spouse to rest you must enter a new world: the funeral director, choice of a coffin, cemetery lot, flowers, wake, arrival of your family, clothes for the body, stream of mourners, the death notice, informing relatives and friends, wishers of sympathy, prayers, condolences, services at church, eulogy, closing of the coffin, funeral procession, hearse, pallbearers, the cemetery, funeral luncheon, the thank-you cards. For a lifetime all of these have been so foreign to your vocabulary, so distant from your mind.

Decisions. Decisions. You are expected to make more meaningful decisions in half a day than you have made in half a lifetime. You make them because you are forced to do so. Considering your shock and your numbness, you decide as best you can. You cannot run and hide. Hour by hour you realize that this is not all a bad dream from which you can wake yourself. You must accept the reality of your loved one's death. From the very first time as a child when you experienced a loss or a death, you knew that you would