

Deborah / Hilda: Thank you for the kind introduction and for the opportunity to speak again at Support and Share Night.

Good evening, everyone.

These evenings are about sharing our stories, and I would like to take this opportunity to share with you how my life has unfolded over the last few years.

For me, it all started on October 19, 2005. Silvia, my first wife, felt sick in the morning, collapsed on the way to the GP around lunchtime, and was transported by ambulance to the hospital. We spent the whole afternoon/evening together at Montford Emergency, they did not find anything. Then they transported her to the ICU for overnight observation, I was not allowed to be with her during the transfer so I went home and got some stuff. Just after I arrived at the ICU door there was a code blue and then, as I say in one of my poems, "they shoved me aside, made me disappear, until it was all over". That is how it all started.

It all ended, well, actually, it has not ended, and one of the things I learned along the way is that it never will end.

My talk tonight is titled:

Me

The following is to give you an overview of what I went through over the last four years after the loss of my spouse.

This is how I dealt with things. It worked for me, but everyone may feel differently on how to go about it. I hope you can learn from my experiences. I certainly keep learning from others.

First off, good news is that things are going a lot better now. I am back among the living, so to speak.

Important to recognize is that, for me, getting better was and is a lot of hard, bloody work. This is not a "time heals", just-sit-back-and-wait process for me. Rather, for me, every step requires a lot of work. Which in turn takes time, but time alone did nothing.

I am sitting here writing this part on October 2nd. September 28 was the 4th time her birthday came around without her being here. I thought shortly about writing her a card, in my mind, but then, what's the point.

Yeah, really, what is the point of all of this?

I learned over time that the answer is: the point of all this is me.

To complicate things, although doing things for me it is the right thing to do, it also feels very wrong, somehow. Since Silvia died everything has been more about me. Or about her, which means, really, about me.

My journey began when I was kicked out of my established comfort zone, big time. My world imploded.

She is somewhere else now, where I imagine she has everything she needs. I am still here, and the fact that since her death I had to focus a lot on me has been a challenge. Being born in the fifties and my upbringing resulted in me always putting others first. Hard to say "No". But, there comes a point when you can't help others if you don't help yourself first.

Literature says people grow when going through grief. I did not know that growing can hurt so much.

Oh yes, another big lesson I learned is that this is not about what I want, this is about what I make out of a situation I never wanted to be in. The total loss of control is not my favorite feeling, though it made me look at the world differently and enjoy things more.

So then, what the heck did I make out of it?

For the first few months or so, absolutely nothing. I did not like it. I hated it. I did not ask for it. I did not want it. Leave me alone.

This little poem illustrates my state at that time.

Leave me Alone (My Space)

Time for myself

Is what I need
A lot of these days

Time to think

Time to be sad
Time to cry
Time to veggie out
Time to curse
Time to get angry
Time to plead
Time to reminisce
Time to grieve
Time for me
Time only for me

Time I take

To have a fit
To break down
To kill time
To move time ahead
By a few hours
Towards another
Shitty night
Of loneliness
Of missing her

Of wanting it
Over

Time I use

To listen to music
Music back from
When we started
To become we
Screw everything
Screw everyone
Go away
Leave me alone
In my space
Of hopeless
Emptiness

Two hours later

You can come back
I will feel better
For a bit
After this
I always
Do

Every single
Frickin time

Holiday season is coming upon us, which made life even more difficult in the early years. On the subject of holidays, the first Christmas was a challenge. The kids (then 19 and 21) did do what they had done previous Christmas's, set up the tree, decorate the house etc. Sticking to that routine seemed to help them. I did very little, other than some creative thinking for surprise gifts.

The second Christmas was better. The kids and myself did more what we wanted, rather than the previous year where somehow, everyone in their own way, we all were trying to do things we associated with Silvia who we so desperately still wanted to have around.

For the second Christmas we did not make any abrupt departures from past practices, rather a whole lot of minor changes. That worked for us.

Beyond doing very little for the first few months, I did go to support and share night at Bereaved Families Ontario (BFO) and I did attend a closed group in April/May 2006.

Coping step by step and day by day pretty well took all the energy I had.

And I took up an exercise routine at the RA Centre. Funny enough, the trigger for that was me seeing a lady at work dancing around the photocopier. I asked her what those moves were, she explained it was kickboxing, and she got me some guest passes after. That left no excuse, as the RA is close to my work. I am still going there today. This was an important step on my journey as it made me feel better, overall. It is also something that I had not done since high school.

During May of 2006 I visited with my daughter family in Germany, a trip her mother had planned to do with her. That was a good thing to do for both of us. Specifically meeting and talking with Silvia's family about her was a healing experience. Burying some of her ashes over there in a public place was welcome by some of her family who appreciated to have a place to visit.

We also gave some of her ashes to our best friends, the kids kept a bit, and we spread the main portion in a flowerbed that any of us can access anytime. It did not quite fit the veggie garden she had sometimes talked about, but none of us have such a garden that we will be able to access forever.

A Vienna psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, (famous for logotherapie and many books, including: "Man's Search for Meaning"), said something along the lines of: it is not yours to question why certain things happen to you, it is yours to deal with whatever life throws at you.

I am neither a psychiatrist nor a philosopher, and there are many ways on how to look at the world. I subscribe to his general idea, though. And that is the angle I took to look at things.

I have lost old friends, made new ones, and got the best support from people whom I would have never expected it from. Reversely, I got the worst "support" from family, where I had hoped for more. Silly me.

Sometimes it felt like I had a big "W" tattooed on my forehead. People gave me "the look". People squirmed. Every once in a while I had the willpower to study the impact of the "W" on people who only knew the new, single me. How they reacted when they learned about what had happened.

I had a very difficult time understanding that most people wanted to help, and just did a very poor job doing it. They were not out to tick me off, though it sure felt like it.

People who have not gone through this do not want to face that losing a loved one can happen to anyone at anytime. I was living proof that it actually does happen so they avoided me.

Ignorance may very well be bliss in this respect.

Throughout the first months of my journey I had to develop an even thicker skin than I already had to fend off comments, suggestions, and beliefs thrown at me. Kiss off, or similar, became well-used phrases. I found it to be a major challenge, when one is not sure who one is anymore, to also have to do what one alone feels must be done, and not to what others think one should do. Sorting that out took a lot of energy.

The trickiest thing about it all: I had to do the heavy hauling myself. All of it. Support is great, I needed it and can always use some. It helped me a lot, it saved me sometimes. Nevertheless, when the lights went out and it was time to sleep, that was the time to work through things, alone. By myself. Which often made me delay going to bed. The time of day that hurt me the most. It was also the main time during which I made real progress.

And then there were the feelings of guilt. And anger. And all the other ones like sadness, frustration, hopelessness, etc.

Next stop on the journey was to build my new identity, sort of divorce my own, old self from my current self. Not an easy task.

I sold my motorcycle in June 2006, something she would have not wanted to happen. So there I was, having the freedom to do what I wanted, except not wanting to have that freedom. A bizarre experience.

I bought another motorcycle in 2008. I did that for myself, and only myself. Add to that all the decisions I had to make, alone, often against many well-meaning advisors, initially often wondering and longing to know what Silvia would say.

Very trying times. It was like learning to live again. Which, I guess, it literally was. I had never lived in a world like that before. This was all completely new. No maps. No guidance. Lots of distractions.

Sailing at breakneck speeds, steering by the seat of my pants. Compass provided by my gut feelings. Long foggy stretches.

Coming to think of it, my journey has been filled with firsts. Besides being scary, on occasion, it felt good to do things I had never done before. Downhill skiing, soaring, a hot air balloon ride my wife gave me for my birthday this year, and the abovementioned aerobics are examples

During all that, the BFO closed group really helped me to put things into perspective; I learned a lot from the many different angles people have on dealing with grief and loss.

So here I was, closed group under my belt, had the crying mostly under control, ready to take on life. Aha, I figured, time to have fun, again. So I was trying to feel the step forward, the difference it made. Well, as it turned out, it was not that easy. As often on this journey, what I could see from the top of the next hill was not what I had figured, or better, had hoped it would be.

In the meantime, I also frequented websites like ywbb.org and widownet.org. There are chat groups and boards to post questions and read responses.

I found these sites helpful as many people detail what they are going through. They also arrange get-togethers that sometimes come with some grief training and outdoor activities.

For myself, I also found these sites could be major contributors to slowly slip me into another deep hole, without me catching on what was happening. For me, there is a "too much" of these sites.

Used with care, and in small doses, worked for me.

In the fall of 2006, I became engaged to - now take a wild guess here, anyone, remember the photocopier ?? - exactly, the lady from the photocopier.

So now I had all my ongoing challenges plus the kids' reaction. And other people's reactions.

But hey, you live only once, so may as well make the best of it.

Hence, again, back to the "me" now being so important.

In the meantime, while that struggle continues, live goes on.

On the subject of life going on, I have been told that loss is a psychological event, and that psychological events have no time base. Which explains the feeling I have certainly experienced: life goes on for the world, but not for a grief stricken family. For us, time stood still.

How to keep on going was a question I often asked myself. For me work provided a constant, because everything else around me, and in me, was in flux. Going to work got me out, provided familiar surroundings and contacts, made me think of other things. Mostly think of other things, that is. It took me about two years to be able to focus again, fully and completely. Until then, I could function, sometimes well, sometimes not as well, and never really well.

All the while the journey of grief continued, except I never saw me being much at one stage or another, at least not for longer time periods. I was all over the place. Progress sort of crept up on me, and often was difficult to detect. My grief experience does not fit any sequential model, so much is for sure. Had the feeling that many people, from day one, wanted me to be happy and normal again. While that is all fine and dandy, the way many came across turned me right off.

By getting engaged in 2006 I certainly got people's hopes up that I would soon be normal again.

Well, I was not. Not, that is, the "old normal" people would like me to be. I've got a new normal, and yeah, excuse me, it will affect my relationships with people who knew me from "before".

Another interesting point along the journey was open issues.

Like the coroners report: it took 18 months to arrive.

Taking a suggestion from a support and share night participant, I lobbied the coroner's office many times to finally provide the report. After I received it the timeline looked as follows:

- Autopsy done after twelve hours

- Two hours to complete it

- 361 days to print the report

- Two days for the mailed report to reach the coroner

- 182 days for the coroner to send it on, well, most of it, they missed a page

Yes, some people really care about what they do. That has been one of the tiring points throughout this whole journey, the way some people screw up carelessly, which may be o.k. in normal situations but is not funny when we are dealing with my dead wife here. Excuse me.

Then I had sort of hung onto some joint bank account without changing it. Somewhere silly, I know, but ever so important to me, for a while. The last joint thing I had.

And then, new challenges.

Like, for some, Silvia is now a taboo subject. Don't bring her up, and if he does, ignore it.

And, over and over again: is he back to normal? Is it safe? Is he back from his trip yet?

Talking about milestones on my journey, here is the big one: when I got married in August 2007, I could just sense the collective relief “Phew, he’s got to be back to normal now”.

Well, no. I decided I don’t have to get over it. I don’t think that I have to let go. Somewhere in my mind I continue to have an ongoing relationship with my first wife. And I have no intentions of turning that off. It is all mine. My new normal (if there ever is such a thing), this is who I am. No way to go back.

And the people who did not know me for years are peeking around the corner again. And I think: o.k., that is great, or maybe it isn’t. How do I deal with them? My answer so far is going with my gut feeling, like I have done so many other times on this journey.

What else?

Life goes on, and the layer of grieving is overlaid by many other major layers. Obtained my P.Eng. designation. The kids finished university. Both moved out in 2008. I sold our house of 21 years. My daughter got married. My mum is very ill. Work has high demands. So do I, I guess.

Anyhow, I feel stressed. Saw a book titled “Full Catastrophe Living”. Read it. Trying to incorporate some of the suggestions in my life. Did things this year that I have not done in many: lay on a chaise—lounge and find figures in the clouds, read fiction books.

Now I need to build my defenses up again, my skin needs to get thicker. So that is my focus at this point.

In summary, how were the last four years?

By far the most difficult, tiring and challenging time of my life.

At the end of the day, as Victor Frankl said, I am the biggest key to keep myself going. If I don’t, all the best-meant help won’t do any good.

It is all about me.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my wife Suzanne for her wisdom, care, understanding, guidance and patience.

And I would like to repeat that one more time: “Thank you”, Suzanne.

I’d also like to thank my kids for still loving me, and everyone else who supported / supports me.

The following poem sums it up. It dates back to late 2007.

Where it is at

My wife Silvia

Passed away in October 2005

Since then

Many many things have changed

And many more will

Most important of all

I found my new love
Heck
I love life
I am engaged and
I am really very happy

Many people

Have of course their own ideas
Of what I should do and when
And why I found my fiancée
Too slow too quick whatever
And that is somewhere fine
I can stand on my own two feet
But I

Must say something here

It has been a hell of a struggle
It has been a long bloody battle
It will never be completely over
It has worn me out occasionally
It sometimes made me really really tired
It is something that most have to live
In order to understand
In my prior life
I have only dated one lady
I have only loved one lady
It does not come easy for me
It is actually very challenging for me
It just happened that Suzanne and I met
It just happened that we both felt we should give it a try
I did not look for someone to do the laundry
I did not look for someone to take over anything
We agreed to take it really slow
We did fall in love
We are happy

Maybe you could

Stop telling me that at my age
No wonder I did that
That if I were 65 years old
I would be expected not to
Etc

Maybe you could

Just say
That you are happy for us

Maybe you could

Just listen

Maybe you could

Just for one minute
Break out of your normal thoughts
And try to understand
Where I came from and
Where it is at

So this is the point where I make a stop, where the four-year summary ends, where tonight's trip is over, where you all need to disembark. I will continue.

Thank you for coming along for the journey and thanks to BFO for being there.

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