

No, you cannot go home to your old comfort zone

OR

Why I stopped Hating the Freedom That Was Forced on Me When Losing Her

The following is to give you an overview of what I went through over the last several months after the loss of my spouse, what I learned and how I dealt with it all.

It worked for me, but everyone may feel different about these things. I hope you can learn from my experiences.

Prolog

October 19, 2005. Lots of clouds and some light rain. She wakes up in the morning, sweating and feeling sick on her stomach. Flue, she said. Looked like to, too. Stayed in bed, I call my work and stay at home. Daughter is home too, no lectures at U of O. I make an appointment with the GP for 1:00 p.m. She does not feel better by then. When going to the car for the GP visit, she passes out and collapses outside, just steps from the car. It's raining. She comes to within seconds. I comfort her. Daughter calls 911. Fire department arrives in three minutes, administers oxygen. Ambulance 7 minutes, cops 9 minutes. All kinds of people around. Paramedics spend nearly 30 minutes doing EKG and other tests. Nobody is in a hurry. Nobody looks worried. Ambulance off to Montfort, I grab some stuff and follow.

Staff is doing check in, she and they laughing and joking. And yes, private room please if she needs to stay. I find her in Emergency by following her laughter. Multiple EKGs, no problem found. Several intravenous bags, including blood thinner. Blood sample needed, lots of it, all her life medical staff had problems getting blood from her, same today. Takes nearly

1.5 hrs until someone gets some from an artery. No internal bleeding. Cardiologist looks at blood results and seems somewhat worried. Different blood thinner bag. He plans a battery of tests for the next day. She'll have to stay in the ICU overnight. By 9:30 p.m. they transport her there, I am not allowed to come along during the transport. I kiss her goodnight, she does not look too worried, just beat, I am dazed and crying, worried that no conclusion is not good. Forget to tell her that I plan to get some things for her from home and come back. Do that. Back at 10:55. Call in the ICU, they say just a minute, we'll get you. No other soul around. Then code blue, hustle and bustle. Don't know if I looked scary, a lady takes me down to the cafeteria and we spent 20 minutes talking. She tells me there has been a problem. I don't want to be with her, I want to be upstairs. I get this sinking feeling, and it is really, really sinking. Then going upstairs, waiting again. Same waiting room. Cardiologist and four or five other people show up, nobody looks happy.

We are sorry, he says.

I told him I figured that much already.

Go and see her. Kiss her goodbye again.

Nurse suggests I should go and get the kids (19 and 21 yrs old). Not sure about that. Alright, maybe I should. Go home, phone ahead and ask kids to get ready to visit mom. Their eyes tell me they are really worried.

Two hours of goodbye. Coroner is there and promises a report, which as of today has not arrived, so I still have no conclusion.

As an aside: The above mentioned "Forget to tell her that I plan to get some things for her from home and come back." event, together with other things in the could have/should have category drove me more nuts than the main event, at some point. I had to convince myself that such little things, put against 26 years of loving her, having two kids, and all the joint adventures was really irrelevant. I later read similar recommendations in several books, and I was glad I did, as the could have/should have category can really pull one down.

Monolog

Hours later I go by my work and sign out for 1 ½ weeks. I need some straightening out, so I drop in unannounced on the lawyer we use who says do not make any decisions and do not do anything that you do not absolutely have to do. Go by Silvia's company and tell them. She has 55 part time and four full time workers. I ask the office staff to keep on going as usual and not to call me for any problem, positively nothing. I go home. Call family, call friends.

Family and friends

Learning my first lessons on grieving as I get these quotes thrown at me:

"Those who go have it easy, those who stay have all the problems."

"Get over it, that was yesterday."

"What did you expect, I told you not to marry her."

Also lots of support, and, from her godmother:

"Don't say anything, I dreamt last night that Silvia died. Did she?"

Nice responses, stupid responses.

Then there is food from work, food from friends and food from neighbors. All this food, and not one of us is hungry.

Lessons I learned:

many people do not know what to say. Some of them really would like to help, some really would like to be left alone since they do not want to deal with grief.

I try to listen between the lines. When sensing hesitation, I probe. I try not to break up friendships over any remarks. They may be just as rattled as I am. Generally, instead of getting upset I tell them that I need to put things on hold for a while.

After suffering through this for a bit I copied and distributed BFO (Bereaved Families Ontario) literature (the two sided grieving process page and the write up on loss of a spouse) to anyone I talked to or was going to talk to. I hand it also to the people who I felt before should leave me alone. It may help them to understand what will and will not work, that they should not

give me advice, and why I behave and react the way I do. Did not have the desired effect on everyone, but on quite a few.

Funeral planning

The options, price lists and sales talk seemed to make the experience of buying a car joyful. This is stupid. I have no experience, so I enlist neighbors to come along, to volunteer suggestions and to sanity check any decisions. After 15 minutes of getting nowhere the golden words come: "you can do what you want, it is your show, anything goes". Now we are talking.

I make arrangements. She wants to be cremated and spread over a vegetable garden. Don't have one, don't feel alright to spread ashes right now. We decide that we will take her home and figure something out in 2006.

Food, flowers, timing, all set. Silvia loved teddy bears. My son digests the "anything goes" message and suggests that every participant at the visitation should receive a teddy bear. Spend nearly one day shopping for 80 cute yet somewhat inexpensive teddy bears. Arrange pictures and collages for the visitation. Drum up people. Become Canadian Citizen in the morning. Judge cries, we all cry, Silvia missed it by one week. Visitation is the same evening.

The kids had wonderful support from their friends, the young people were amazingly comfortable and elegant in their support.

Lessons I learned:

I stayed away from the package offers and price lists and focused on what was in the will, what was discussed, what I felt comfortable with. Ignored even family suggestions if they did not jive with what I felt was the right way of doing it. I have to live with it forever, and nobody knew Silvia the way I did.

I urged people to sign the guest book. I really remembered very little of the whole visitation the day after.

I used the freedoms available in this country to design the process. For example, in Germany one cannot even take the ashes home.

Ashes spreading update

Last month my daughter and I buried some ashes and mementos in Silvia's favorite city park in our hometown. Mainly because a small part of her

always stayed there. Turns out that the family loves it as they now have a place to visit.

We also had a request from our best friends and supplied some ashes for their patch, the kids want to keep some each, and the rest we plan to spread this month in a garden, as Silvia had wanted.

Support

I have no family in North America other than my kids. I hit on everyone and anyone that I thought would be able to help, kids teachers, neighbors, old friends, new friends. That is not typically me. I was in a daze and on a roll. No prisoners taken, no excuses accepted. Mostly everyone said yes. Some family in Europe said no, but hey, you can't chose family.

Lesson I learned: I lost several friends, couples as well as singles. I gained new ones. As of now, the quantity is lower but the quality is better.

Someone at work whose spouse passed away years ago suggests BFO (Bereaved Families Ontario). I need help, badly. I think I do because it seems for me impossible to figure out if I do things "right", if I am off base, and I know that this one is too big for me alone and too important to goof up on. Which I cannot do with the kids needing me.

Kids don't want to go. I show up at the 2005 November meeting, two weeks after Silvia's death. Can't talk yet. Weird yet helpful. Come back for more ever since. I can connect with these people. Some went through what appears to be worse than what I had to do. Some make me laugh. And everyone sees things differently.

I just finished 10 weeks in a closed group on May 26. This is really good medicine for me.

Lesson I learned: Keep going to BFO (Bereaved Families Ontario). I did not model myself after a grieving book or other grieving people. I do my own show, at my own pace. I just am myself. I felt/feel I had to, there was/is no more "we" to make any decisions. And the great news is that at BFO they let you be yourself.

I read several books on grieving, for kids and for adults. Some struck my cord, some definitely not. I stopped reading a few as it got too depressing.

Then I find some, where I can identify with what the author suggests.

“On Grief and Grieving” by Elizabeth Kuebler-Ross is the best match for me.

To help my kids, and myself in dealing with them, I read “The Loss That Is Forever” by Maxine Harris.

I help my kids, as much as they let me. They help me when I am down. They also imposed some things on me. They openly expressed their fear of losing the single remaining parent; they do not want to be left alone anytime soon. We went through a phase of them parenting me, as far as health concerns and general worrying goes.

I follow their suggestions, mostly, and anyway, I ran out of excuses on some subjects.

Even did an annual check up. Where “annual” will be the future, the last one was 24 years before that. And that without the kids pushing this point. They are impressed.

Spouses Belongings

Some things I donated within a month. The big closet cleanup happened in May. I had many suggestions on how much too late or how much too early that was. I just followed my own speed and found a time the kids and I could agree on.

New Relationship/Partner

The subject where perceptions, beliefs, opinions, religions etc. collide more than on most others, from what I have seen.

I talked to one lady with a small child who moved in with a guy after two months. Other people say one year, or two years, or five years, or never, you get the idea. A lot of opinions are out there.

From a factual viewpoint, the “till death do you part” promise has been fulfilled.

Both one’s own and the spouses family will have opinions no matter what one does.

Same for friends.

Kids will need careful attention on the subject. Mine have very strong opinions on this, that is for sure.

My recipe is to be open about that fact that one considers to start to date again, to assure them that nobody will be instantly plunged into their life and be the new parent, and to provide ample notice and time to get acquainted to the idea and, later, to the person if things work out.

Lets face it, kids figure out quickly if a person spends suddenly more time on the phone, goes out to more dinners, spends more time on the computer etc. I give them the respect they deserve, and hear their opinions.

Lesson I learned: no matter what I do on this one, at least one party is likely to be unhappy about it. So, what can I do, I go with what I feel is O.K. for me.

The Comfort Zone / The Forced Freedom

Even if one does not want to accept it yet, somewhere we all know that we can never go back home to the old comfort zone we miss so much.

As an aside: It was on a Sunday in February, and Sundays were for several months the worst days for me. I was crying at home and my son asked me if I needed anything. I said "I just want to go home". To which he replied "But you are at home". "No, I am not." I said. "Yes, you are". "No, I am not." And then it hit me, reality, that is. It finally stuck that what I had was it, there was no other home to go to. Done, over, out. A major step for me, as we will see in a bit.

We have been thrown a new freedom to reshape our lives, to build a future, and, if we want to, to find a new partner.

Some say "freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose". I'd rather think "freedom is just another word for everything left to gain". As our old comfort zone has been destroyed, both of these beliefs seem outright scary. I felt as scarred as I never have felt before, initially. Now it comes in bouts, and most of the time I feel O.K.

It boils down to something very simple, as usual in life: one will live the life one dares to dream. Taking time, rebuilding strength, and accepting that others may do that at a different pace is working for me. Silvia would want me to be happy, so I am going ahead to build my dream of happiness. My new comfort zone.

Silvia and I had our wills, power of attorneys etc. all set up and up to date. We had discussed what we would think the other one should/could do if one of us passed away. We both agreed that getting a new partner would be quite O.K. if one felt like it. As long as that person would love and support the kids.

Silvia was convinced she would get to be at least 76 years old, irritate the in-laws and have fun with the grandchildren. I will never forget her.

Just like everyone else I did not ask for this freedom, I was given no choice.

Refusing to sink into depression or to stop dreaming, I am now converting my worst nightmare into my new dream. Am never quite sure, though, about how long that will take and where exactly I am along the path.

About four months down the line I noticed that I stopped hating my new freedom.

As an aside: That pretty well coincided with the above mentioned "I just want to go home." Sunday event. How could I hate my future, my new home, now under construction?

I got to today by following my heart, not by following the expectations of others.

Epilog

Please keep in mind that grieving people don't need any suggestions, they need to be listened to, as here I am telling you that I have been dating someone for the last two months.

Are things looking up? Yes, and I am very happy they are.

Am I done grieving? No.

When looking up some status reports I had written to myself in late 2005 and early 2006 I do realize that those were very much so more dark, hopeless, and aggressive. Today I actually have more positive memories. Thinking of Silvia now leads to smiles (mostly), not crying. I hope that will get even better over time.

Thank you for listening, and thanks to BFO for being there.

As I said, I will need you all for a while yet, and I am very grateful for you all being here.