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LOSING HOLLY: A TRUE STORY ABOUT GRIEF

The improbable came true. I held her letter in my hand. Holly had been my high school sweetheart, but had said college choices were more important. Seven years of letters kept us in touch. One weekend I risked that friendship to confess, in the most unambiguous way, I still loved her. Coincidentally, her letter to me crossed in the mail, and there was no mistaking her words. The feeling was mutual. What a miracle. She was smart with a steely edge. Imagine strength and beauty like Katharine Hepburn and long wheat-colored hair. She could have had anyone. I was, at best, a good-hearted nerd.

A yearlong honeymoon began almost 30 years of marriage. Before my eyes, childbirth brought two boys. It seemed like forever that life was about family, schools, swim teams, fund-raisers, and busy-ness. Then one day doctors found a blood clot in the portal vein to Holly's liver. "All I want is to live long enough to get the boys out of school," she said. Graciously, four years passed. Both boys graduated high school. Matt was in law school and Dave was in college, when Holly's bleeding recurred. She predicted, "This will be the one that gets me." She was steely to the end, when, six weeks later, she told the doctors to pull the plug. She died at 55.

After leaving the hospital, I told Matt and his girlfriend, "I'm going for a walk on Ridgeline." I tried smiling. "Don't worry about me. I won't go jump off a bridge." I went out in the woods and screamed.

Thinking myself realistic about life and death, I hoped I might suffer less. At least I might get some kind of credit for the grieving I had already suffered during the darkening weeks of hospitalization. But I don't think it happened that way. Grief took its own sweet time.

I went back to work a week later. Holly's mom had done the same thing when Holly's dad died at only 46. The routine of work seemed to help. There was normal social interaction – involving things other than yourself. You could spend your time helping with other people's problems, which, in the law business, are bigger than your own.

Time alone was thankfully alone. I understood the trumpeter swan reaction – how the surviving spouse gives up on life. Several times I was, let's just say, overwhelmed. At all times, I carried tissues, since tears came unpredictably – for months.

I rearranged the house, learned Holly's chores, and gave away a truckload of her things. I made the house mine. But I also put up family photos of her as if to declare she was no less a part of things now.

I took countless walks in the woods, soaking in the solace of the outdoors. Jogging would uplift a day's mental state. Lack of exercise made days more emotional.

In the first weeks, the acute grief seemed focused on Holly's own loss of life. There were factual questions. Did we make medical mistakes? There were irrational questions. Did she really know

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that I loved her? My smallest unkindness was remembered with intense remorse. Later on, the grief was probably more about my own loss. The house was empty. The boys were gone.

I realized that no one teaches us how to face loss.

I began reading every grief book I could find. The best was *A Grief Observed*, by C.S. Lewis. It was the first thing to help me. I'd sworn if relief from grief meant forgetting Holly in the slightest, then let me remain a madman. But Lewis's pain was just as bad, and he said something remarkable. He remembered his wife more, when he grieved her less.

On some nights, comfort was found in the short statements that make up Molly Fumia's *Safe Passage: Words to Help the Grieving Hold Fast and Let Go*.

Honors should go to former governor Barbara Roberts for *Death Without Denial, Grief Without Apology: A Guide for Facing Death and Loss*, for addressing these issues and sharing her story of losing Frank. Most unconventional is *The Mercy Papers*, by Robin Romm, a raw tale of a daughter's loss of her mom Jackie, a Eugene lawyer.

I accepted the emotional mayhem, rather than resisting it. I expected that grief would then pass sooner, like bad weather. That, too, didn't seem to come true. I wondered, how long does this last? How long before you can begin to feel normal again? I had heard people confide a year, three years, or five years. Others said, "You always carry some grief with you." For me, all these answers turned out to be true. The difference is a matter of magnitude.

I enrolled in a Photoshop class, took long walks with a friend, and journaled. I hosted a movie night group, which morphed into a book group at my house. I joined a second book group. I signed up for more classes. Before long, there were new circles of friends, meaningful books, and a spiritual interest.

I attended a grief group. As I sat at the grief group's table, I am sure everyone was like me. We wanted a map – some idea what was ahead. No parent had warned us; no grandparent had confided advice. Today, in hindsight, I could tell what I wish I knew then. Predictably, there are ups and downs from day to

day. Things gradually get better from month to month. If you imagined a model, it would look like a spiral with slanted rings. Each single circuit around is up and down, but each circuit climbs a little higher than the last, until returning to a functioning life.

I gradually realized that loss is addressed on several levels. For one, you try to get answers to the "factual questions." For another, you work on resolving things on an emotional level. You experience and accommodate your loss of your loved one, loss of your relationship, and loss of home life. Finally, grief is resolved on a deeper level yet, which is not easily described. Choose your own words, depending on your experience or belief, but this is my impression. Grief is resolved by something spiritual, something of heart, and something beyond what we think of as just one's self.

I found C.S. Lewis was right. When I grieve Holly less, I remember her best. In fact, it is more than that. She is more a part of me than ever – and not in the sense of some psychological delusion – but in some profound sense I cannot explain.

Loss taught me that there was nothing special about my experience. Loss is as common as the obituaries and as horrific as the violence in the news. I just wish we all knew a little better how to handle loss before it happens. As it is, it is a marvel that we have the strength to live through it. But we do. Thank Grace for that.

Joel DeVore lost his wife Holly Weston on November 13, 2007. Some years later, Trish Ashley, a former client, invited him to coffee. They were married August 10, 2013. Soon after, this account was penned at the invitation of OAAP in support of others who might face tough times.