

Reflecting on the Devastating Loss of a Loved One: A Bereaved Daughter and Husband Tell Their Stories

By

Wendy and Roger Clark

A daughter, Wendy, and a husband, Roger, of a deceased loved one, Bev, reflect on their individual experiences of grief and mourning and on the ways in which they have, after about two and a half years, been able to reconstruct meaningful lives, despite continuing to feel the pain of bereavement. Their hope is that this reflection may be useful to others who have lost loved ones.

Wendy: I never imagined my life to be where it was between the ages of 29 and 30, just under three years ago. I was finishing up a 28-week fire academy, and about to hit my 30th birthday.

I was ecstatic, a ball of nerves, and curious about what was to come. I had naively believed that nothing could get in my way, and life was as good as it could ever be.

I had been introduced to the unknown world of grief in my past, but nothing like the grief I was about to meet on Thursday, March 18th, 2021. I got off my last night shift from the fire department. I went by my parents' home, knowing my mom had been two days out from getting her second shot of the Pfizer COVID vaccine. I started talking about my night and how I had to perform CPR on someone, and then I noticed my mom was no longer in the room. She was in the kitchen, vomiting in the sink. The way she presented and her symptoms at the time told me that she was experiencing common side effects from the vaccination. I made sure she was comfortable on the couch as I offered to stay by her side. She and my father insisted that I go home to my place to nap. Reluctantly, I agreed and turned to my mom to say, "I love you, and I'll see you later," not knowing that those would be the last words I spoke to her.

About five hours passed when I awoke from my nap, realizing my father had called me twice, which was slightly unusual. I called him back and he advised me that, "mom is very sick. I have EMS here; they're pumping her chest." That's the first time I've ever felt time stand still. I knew what was taking place, but I

couldn't get any words out. My mom ended up going into cardiac arrest (when one's heart suddenly stops beating) early on that afternoon.

I hung up the phone and calmly drove to my parent's home, where I witnessed EMS performing life-saving measures on my mom. I left the room and went outside. I wanted the EMS crew to do be able to do their job and allow my dad to see that everything they could do was being done. But, due to the nature of my profession, I already knew the outcome. I suddenly lost control of my body and collapsed on the sidewalk. I had this nauseating feeling in my stomach, as I pictured my insides presenting like a tangle of wires. At the same time, I felt as if a miracle was still in the cards, and maybe, just maybe, my mom would be okay.

I watched the ambulance pull off, knowing the hospital would soon call to deliver the worst news our family has ever endured. I went inside my parent's home. The family room was covered in used up medical supplies. One of my mom's shoes lay on the carpet and all I could think was, "How could she go to the hospital with only one shoe?!" I begged the rescue officer to tell me what he thought the outcome was going to be, even though deep down, I knew the answer. He was brutally honest as he looked at me and said, "She was still warm when we got here. We did everything we could, hon, I'm sorry."

The next few months were a blur. Looking back now, two years later, I realize I was functioning on autopilot. But in the moment, I felt as if I were unstoppable. Sure,

I had just lost my mom, but I kept thinking how she would be so proud of how I was handling myself. I kept busy, focused on my performance as a probationary firefighter, and tried to be there as much as I could for my family. I remember at the end of May I caught my first fire. It was in a commercial building, and everything I had spent the last six months training for came into play at that fire. Our Engine Co. spent six hours on scene and then left to respond to a male party having a nosebleed.

I left work that night on cloud nine. I couldn't wait to call my mom and tell her about my first fire. And that inclination right there hit me like a ton of bricks. Was I crazy? Why did I think I was going to be able to call my mom? I felt this sudden wave of pain and sadness as I began to uncontrollably sob in my car. I then called my dad. I told him about my fire, but I wasn't excited anymore.

I continued to have multiple instances similar to that one for months coming. I would go by my parents' house to see my dad and expect him to be on the couch watching the nightly news with my mom. I would wait for her to text me, for her cooking, for her long emails outlining the family's summer plans. I knew my mom was dead. I knew she wasn't coming back; but for some odd reason I kept feeling as though maybe I would soon wake up from this nightmare. I felt insane.

I mustered through the next few months up until the beginning of winter. I started to notice my body responding abnormally to noises and visuals at work. I thought, *I deal with this every day, why am I suddenly tensing up?* Any cardiac related medical call we would respond to, I would freeze, and I wasn't following through with my normal duties. I was going back and forth with the Chief of the Department on whether or not I was going to stay in the fire service. He was very supportive and didn't want me to leave, but eventually, I decided walking away was the safest choice to make for myself, and for those I worked beside.

After my resignation, I started pushing away those closest to me, including my dad. I was in a dark hole and couldn't believe my life was the way it was. I was upset with how he and other family members were grieving. I was comparing my life to other's who had lost a parent but seemed "ok." If it's one thing I know now, it's that each person's grief looks different and never tell anyone how *they* should grieve.

My therapy sessions became bland, and I wasn't feeling "heard" anymore. I decided to search for a new therapist, and for me that was daunting. I had been seeing the same therapist for the last ten years. How

was I supposed to start all over? I eventually parted ways with my old therapist and gained a strong, healthy relationship with a new one.

I tried a few different jobs, not related to the fire or medical field, and was very unhappy. I had no idea how I was going to get back into the fire service, but the more clarity I gained, the more I knew that the fire service was my calling. One thing I carry with me every day is my mom's voice cheering me on. She was my biggest supporter in life and during my fire academy experience-- even when I wanted to quit. There was a saying that was drilled into our heads during the academy and that is, "No one is coming to save you."

I had the answers all along, but it was time to do the work. It had been a year of misery. I was done feeling sorry for myself and blaming those I loved for my pain. I wanted so badly to find my "norm" again, but I knew it would take baby steps, and this sense of acceptance through loss. My mom always reminded me to take things one day at a time, and even one hour at a time. So, I relied on the life tools I had and the resilience my mom instilled in me.

I gradually started getting the energy back again to do the things I loved. I looked to starting healthy habits that I knew would help my re-building phase. I found that journaling, being kind to myself, and listing daily goals were all helpful in getting me to view things from a wider perspective. I also listed things or people for whom I am grateful.

I immersed myself back into the medical field and started re-applying to fire departments. I knew that if I could come out strong on the other side after losing my mom, I could do anything. There were multiple goals I had to achieve but having those in place allowed me to re-gain some purpose.

I eventually landed a spot on a fire department at a town in the state where I lived. It was a bittersweet process, but what allowed me to get through it again was looking inwards, and knowing I was making my mom proud.

It sounds cliché, but our mindset is what makes us or breaks us. No one but myself was coming to save me. I had to re-learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. I'm not saying what worked for me will work for someone else, because we are all different.

Unfortunately, some of us are going to experience tragic events throughout life. It's going to become a part of you, but it doesn't define you, unless you allow it to. Nothing in life can break you, unless you allow it to.

I still have my days filled with intense sadness, regret, anger, and some denial. I will never get over losing my

mom, but I've been able to accept that what happened, happened. I cannot change the past, nor can I control something out of my control. I think of my mom every single day, and she's left an everlasting mark on my daily life. I am constantly reminding myself of how grateful I am to have had such a role model throughout the years. I would do anything to be able to have her here physically, to give her one last hug, but that's life. I am weirdly at peace knowing what it's like to have a sustainable life again, to genuinely smile and laugh again, all while carrying around an underlying sadness that can no longer break me, but will forever live within me.

Roger: Bev and I had been married 52 years, been together for 55, when she died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack on March 18, 2021. Wendy's captured well the horrors of that day for her. Let me just add that the world, as I had known it, was shattered. Bev and I had taken Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's course at the University of Chicago in 1971. Kubler-Ross had published her famous book, *On Death and Dying*, two years earlier, a book that famously suggested that dying persons, and persons experiencing grief in the wake of bereavement, go through five, well-known, stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

As a sociology professor, who occasionally taught our department's course on aging, I had dutifully asked students to learn these stages when we dealt with death and dying. But nothing in Kubler-Ross model had prepared me for the trauma I would personally experience after Bev's death, the panic attacks I would experience when doing the grocery shopping, something Bev had mainly done before, or the uncontrollable weeping after visiting with couple friends whose company we'd always enjoyed together before. Wendy's grief for her mom was different from mine, but there were similarities.

There were moments when I, too, thought I was going insane. Trauma, panic, overwhelming sadness (not really "depression"), and a sense of insanity were among the clues that Kubler-Ross's scheme *did not* completely describe my experience of bereavement. Friends and family were great: supportive and loving. But only Wendy seemed quite as crazy as I felt—and even that craziness, after the first day, and as she suggests, took a while to manifest itself in her and was different from mine.

Because of Covid, we couldn't have a memorial service for Bev until five months after her death but, in a way, that was a blessing. It gave me something, other than putting my financial house in order for my children in

case I died (something the death of Bev somehow made much more credible than it had been before), to focus on. (And directed my attention to something other than the new, huge hole, in my life.) I had to spend some time on practical questions—like where the service would be and how to reserve that venue, who would preside, who might speak, what I myself might say, if I said anything.

I couldn't bring myself to dispose of any of Bev's things—her books and papers (she too was a college professor), her clothing, her toothbrush. I began reading all kinds of books about grief, including Joan Didion's (2005) *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which she claims she couldn't give away her deceased husband's shoes for fear he might need them. I suppose that might have been part of my reasoning for not discarding Bev's stuff. (I still, 30 months later, haven't disposed of much of her stuff.) Wendy seems to have experienced lots of that "magical thinking" too, as her inclination to call Bev after she'd dealt with that big fire and many other things she reports imply.

Mary-Frances O'Connor, a neurobiologist, explains in her (2022) *The Grieving Brain* that even while our conscious brain can recognize the loss of a loved one, there is brain circuitry, below our consciousness, that still expects to encounter that person in certain places, at certain times, and with a certain emotional intensity. This subconscious circuitry, O'Connor observes, is educable, but often needs several unexpected disappointments to take in the fact that the loved one will not be there when expected. And when we feel those disappointments, whatever our conscious brain tells, we are torn apart.

After (and even before) the memorial service I became more and more anxious. I tried to stick to a rigorous routine of exercise, meal preparation, sleep and completely absorbing activities like doing Sudoku and crossword puzzles and trying to learn languages via an online app—Duolingo. I'd started working with Duolingo before Bev died, thinking we'd do foreign travel after our retirement. Then Bev died two months before she was to retire. I knew I'd wouldn't be doing much foreign travel without Bev, but my "magical thinking" involved a notion that I shouldn't give up on the language learning that might have facilitated that travel.

In general, I expected routine to protect me to some extent from the sadness and anxiety that living a life without Bev brought me. But even that didn't work as expected. For instance, since part of my routine meal preparation (often for one of my children who lived close enough to visit many nights) frequently involved doing

another routine thing—listening to the music I used to listen to as I prepared meals for Bev—I’d end up crying as I did the work. The music and the work were just too evocative. And some of these routines, like walking the dog Bev and I shared with our daughter, Wendy, engendered heart-wrenching recollections of walking the same places with the same (and other) dog(s) with Bev. Visiting with couple friends we’d enjoyed together always led to bawling, usually, but not always, on the way home. Again, I often thought I might be going insane.

One friend, a psychiatrist, recommended and referred me to a therapist, a man who has been an enormous boon over the past 30 months. I have many friends who listen to my expressions of grief even while we’re doing something else (playing tennis, going for walks, watching dogs play at the dog park). But having someone whose primary job is to listen to me talk about the sorrows of my new life has been very helpful, especially as he’s also permitted me to talk about activities that might help create a meaningful new life. After a while, these new activities included seeing another woman, something that was much more fraught than I might have expected it to be. O’Connor (2022:201) puts my difficulties with this new relationship into perspective:

The restoration of a meaningful life . . . often means developing a new relationship or strengthening an attachment with someone we already know. Bringing someone new into your life can lead to an eruption of grief, even after a period of relative calm. In the enjoyment of a new relationship, the mere presence of the new person can be a reminder of the absence of your deceased loved one. This requires time and gentleness with yourself, and remembering that the new person . . . and the person you loved . . . are not the same. Gaining a new loving, supportive relationship does not mean forgetting or rejecting the one that came before.

I’m very fond of my “new person,” but I’m not yet sure I will find a loving relationship in my “after (Bev) life.” I do, however, believe that such a thing is possible and desirable.

Another friend recommended a grief support group. I joined one five months after Bev died and have been in it ever since, recently having become its coordinator. It’s hard to overstate how useful this group has been to me. Almost immediately, and ever since, talking with other partners and spouses who have lost a loved one has given me the sense that, no matter how crazy I sometimes feel, the craziness is normal. And this is comforting.

I’ve also observed that, for most members, the second year was almost as bad as, sometimes worse than, the first. And, since this was true for me, this too was comforting. Finally, though, the group has shown me that while there are amazing similarities among those who have lost a beloved life partner (and, after all, who else would sign up for a grief support group?), there are inevitable differences. As just one example, those who lost a loved one to a long and agonizing death seem much more likely to experience a sense of relief when the person dies than those who’s loved one dies suddenly and unexpectedly—a group for which trauma is often an element of bereavement. (And where were “relief” and “trauma” in Kubler-Ross’s model?)

I agree with Wendy that it’s our own frame of mind, and no one else’s, that allows us to define ourselves as doing ok, even as we continue to miss our loved one, sometimes painfully. I can now look at my life and see that I’m doing things that I define as productive and satisfying. Even at 75, I am able to exercise vigorously every day. I can still teach a college class each semester, something that I view as helping others. I can facilitate a grief support group. I can read and write with pleasure.

Much of my reading and writing and facilitating are done to honor Bev’s memory, just as Wendy’s work as a firefighter is done, at least in part, to honor her memory as well. I can walk dogs, our (Wendy’s and my) shared one and others when friends need me too. I can meet with friends regularly and enjoy their company. (I can even now define get togethers with “couple” friends as, in part, honoring Bev’s memory, and so largely enjoyable.) I can care for others when they’re sick and need me for other things. I might even figure out how to have a loving relationship with another woman (though this still remains to be seen). These are things I might not have defined as “enough” two and a half years ago. Now they are beginning to feel as if they are, even as I continue to experience moments of intense sadness.

But maybe Wendy and I are giving our conscious selves a little too much credit when we suggest changes in our frames of mind have helped us to see ourselves as being more functional than we were immediately after Bev’s death. Maybe O’Connor is right that gradual changes in our subconscious inner circuitry have permitted those frames to change. That it’s simply taken this much time for our inner circuitry to figure out that Bev won’t be where we think she should be, when we think she should be there and with the same closeness she showed us before she died. And this circuitry is finally learning to deal with it. If that means that our advice to those who are recently bereaved boils down to,

“Things get softer with time,” so be it. Perhaps that’s all that people in such circumstances need to hear anyway.

References

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