

# LOSS OF FAITH

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MONTH ONE

DAY FIVE

*I fired God that day.*

—STEPHANIE ERICSSON

“Inside, I hear a voice that tells me I will understand how your dying fits into a greater scheme of things,” writes Ericsson in her memoir, *Companion Through the Darkness*, “but even four months later, I still stubbornly think God is a bumbling idiot.”

It’s natural to lose faith in the face of disaster. What sort of heavenly power could have allowed, much less authored, such a senseless tragedy? But even as we question God—we should and we must—we also seek deeper understanding. The irony is that at the moment we most need spiritual sustenance, we find it most elusive.

Ultimately faith may be either dashed or strengthened. But either way it’s just fine to vent anger at God. As the saying goes, “Just because you give up on God, it doesn’t mean God gives up on you.”

**AFFIRMATION: I have faith that my faith will be restored.**

## PARTNERSHIP

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MONTH ELEVEN

DAY ONE

*So we grew together  
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
But yet an union in partition,  
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

We came together in the creative enterprise of joining separate lives into true partnership. As our love flowered, we merged and grew, finding common ground and shared purpose without losing sight of our individuality. Now how do we go on when we feel split in half?

We go on by continuing to grow, by opening ourselves to the possibility of new experiences. And we go on by continuing to nurture the fruits of our union—the home we created, the children we raised, the friendships, careers, commitments, and community we cultivated.

Our lives are eternally intertwined. Yet now we must forge ahead on our own, despite our loss, to see what lies in the distance.

**AFFIRMATION: I honor the life we had together.**

# SPIRIT



MONTH EIGHT

DAY ONE

*And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like  
after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember  
ever having seen such a thing.*

—LEWIS CARROLL, *Alice in Wonderland*

Light swirls into curly wisps of smoke before trailing off into thin air. It happens so quickly, one second a glowing flame, then instantly extinguished and transformed so quickly our eyes cannot see its changing form.

It's the closest image of spirit I've ever been struck by, and it comes from a passage in *Alice in Wonderland*, in which Alice contemplates the concept of death. "For it might end, you know," said Alice to herself, "in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?"

When his "flame" went out, what became of his essence? Age-old questions assume greater meaning as we grapple with our loss and open ourselves to feeling his spirit in whatever form it takes.

**AFFIRMATION: Your spirit is all around me.**



*I know God will not give me anything I can't handle.*

*I just wish that He didn't trust me so much.*

—MOTHER TERESA

It's comforting to know that even Mother Teresa, the sainted paragon of infinite love and seemingly inexhaustible resources, wished for an occasional reprieve. And it's refreshing to put a humorous spin on yet another cliché that, in essence, is true, but nonetheless annoying, especially when we're sick and tired of being told how strong we are.

Someone may tell us that "suffering builds character." It's a lovely idea, but totally irrelevant in the midst of our sorrow, infuriating enough to make us want to throw a brick through the window. Down the road, we may appreciate our admirable resilience and deepened character. But for now, how about a break from the pain? Or even a temporary breakdown, if only for a day or two while we let down our guard and halt the heroics. After all, even saints are human.

**AFFIRMATION: I don't have to always be strong.**



## THE BED

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MONTH FIVE

DAY TWELVE

*I am incapable of sleeping in our bed, the bed in which there were good times and bad times, the bed in which Bill died.*

—RUTH COUGHLIN

It's common for women to avoid sleeping in their bed for a while. His absence is palpable; we toss and turn, holding onto his pillow, trying to find a comfortable position in what feels like a vast wasteland without him at our side.

If our bed was his deathbed, we may hesitate to crawl in. Feelings of sadness, weirdness, fear, and trepidation may keep our bed from being the safe haven it used to be.

For some women the “marriage bed” is a place of sweetness and comfort, full of wonderful memories. For others it takes time to be able to return to the bed they shared with their mate. Sleep wherever you will get the best rest right now.

**AFFIRMATION:** Sweet dreams.



## THE DEATHBED

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MONTH FOUR

DAY TWENTY-FOUR

*“So now you can let go, my darling.”  
He stroked her gray hair. “Now you can let go.”*

—ALDOUS HUXLEY

Some of us have recurring memories of deathbed scenes: I sat beside my mom’s bed as she struggled to hold on, and I gave her permission to give up, quietly whispering, “Let go now. Let go.”

Unless our spouse died suddenly, the final moments preceding death have a powerful impact. In what may have been one of the most meaningful encounters of our marriage, we said, “Good-bye.” We said, “I don’t want you to hurt anymore.” We said, “Now you can let go, my darling, now you can let go.” In that moment of altruistic love we let go, despite our heartbreak, despite our distress at relinquishing our mate.

Our desire to help smooth our mate’s transition from this world to the next was a profound act of love. It may be one of the hardest and most generous things we do in our lifetime.

**AFFIRMATION: I loved him that much.**

# GRATITUDE

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MONTH TEN

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN

*Each day a thousand treasures come to me  
with every passing moment.*

—A Course In Miracles

Gratitude is a powerful antidote to despair.

Being aware of what we're thankful for helps us bridge the gap between hurting and healing. When we stop to notice all the wonderful treasures in our lives, we intentionally shift our focus from what we *don't* have to what we *do* have.

It's hard to feel bad and good at the same time. When we acknowledge what's *good* in our lives—the friends who sustain us, meaningful work, something our child said that made us laugh, or the daffodils beginning to bloom outside our kitchen door—we shift our attitude from feeling hopeless to appreciating all we have.

Counting our blessings lessens our pain; we put things in perspective by remembering, even in this time of difficulty, how fortunate we are, and how very, very much there is to be thankful for.

**AFFIRMATION: I am so blessed.**

# ACCEPTANCE



MONTH FIVE

DAY THIRTEEN

*There is no correct way to grieve and no time limit.*

—PEGGY EASTMAN, *Godly Glimpses*

This is one of the most infuriating aspects of grieving; others seem to have a timetable—usually one year—by which time they think we ought to be over our mourning and getting on with our lives.

One widow, Teresa, husband's death, recalls, "As soon as one year had passed, people said things like, 'Now you can date,' which was the farthest thing from my mind."

Rachel, another widow, felt patronized and judged by a passing comment. "Despite what rough shape I was in, I had forced myself to go to my best friend's birthday party three months after Jake died," she says, "and this person I barely knew came up to me and asked, 'Isn't it a little soon to be partying?'"

These sorts of unsolicited comments are misguided at best, and at worst, rude and unacceptable judgments coming from someone who doesn't have a clue as to what we're going through and how best to endure it. Each of us grieves in our own way, at our own personal pace. There is no one way, no right way—only the way that best facilitates our healing.

**AFFIRMATION: "Accept me. Don't judge me."**

# LOVE



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## MONTH ONE

## DAY ONE

*I will not forget you. I have carved you on the palm of my hand.*

—ISAIAH 49:15

The truest words of all:

I will not forget you. You are in my waking thoughts, my sweetest memories, my dearest dreams.

I will not forget you. You have touched my soul, opened my eyes, changed my very experience of the universe.

I will not forget you. I see you in the flowers, the sunset, the sweep of the horizon, and all things that stretch to infinity.

I will not forget you. I have carved you on the palm of my hand. I carry you with me forever.

**AFFIRMATION: For every season, always.**



## TAKE YOUR TIME

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MONTH TWELVE

DAY FOURTEEN

*Our culture assumes grief should be over in a year so people may think they're going crazy if they don't "wrap it up" by then.*

—LOLLY WINSTON

I can't say it enough times: mourning is a highly individual experience with no set time frames, deadlines, or right way to grieve. You may be nearing one year and feeling significantly more peaceful and optimistic; you may be well into your second or third year and still feel overwhelming sadness.

Like the majority of widows, you most likely experience mourning that is more like a winding road than a straight line; first you feel numb, then miserable, then just okay, then slightly depressed, then a whole lot better, then back to miserable, then pretty good for awhile—and on and on it goes.

It happens how it happens, and it takes as long as it takes. Don't pressure yourself, and don't let yourself feel pressured by anyone else's hypothetical scenario of how you should feel.

Most likely you loved him longer than a year. Give yourself at least that much time and probably more.

**AFFIRMATION: There's no rush.**

# FAREWELL



MONTH TWELVE

DAY TWENTY-NINE

*Without him, the sun will never be as bright.*

—RUTH COUGHLIN

We have survived our loss; we have learned, and continue to learn, how to go on and live full and meaningful lives despite the ache in our heart.

And we will never forget him. Because indeed nothing is quite as vivid, as sweet, as wonderful as when we were graced by his presence. We are stronger for having loved him and more compassionate and humane for having endured his loss.

Without him the sun will never be as bright. But as we gaze toward the infinite reaches of sky, we light on a faraway star and once more say:

**AFFIRMATION:** “Good-bye, my love.”



## YEARNING

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MONTH FOUR

DAY TWO

*I tasted thee, and now hunger and thirst for thee.*

—SAINT AUGUSTINE

We feel a constant ache within. Having drunk from the spring of his love, we now wander, parched in the desert, wondering if our thirst will ever be quenched. Having dined at the banquet table, rapturously satiated, we hunger for the most paltry of crumbs, starved for his sustenance.

Had we never tasted love, our loss wouldn't be nearly so palpable. And we would never have felt so full. We may always crave his touch, his smell, the sweet taste of his kiss, but with time our thirst and hunger will subside.

**AFFIRMATION: I remember how sweet you tasted.**



## FEELING SELF-CONSCIOUS

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MONTH EIGHT

DAY FOURTEEN

*I realized that for the time being I could not trust myself  
to present a coherent face to the world.*

—JOAN DIDION

We've been looking forward to a party, only to find ourselves anxious and trembling in the bathroom. We're driving along, feeling perfectly okay when suddenly tears start streaming down our face and we have to pull over. A waiter asks if we want thousand island or ranch dressing, and we snap at him for interrupting us.

How are we supposed to gauge whether we've "got it together" enough to be consistently pleasant in any situation other than home by ourselves, where our fractured identity won't cause any harm?

We don't. Which is why we protect ourselves now—and for however long it takes—by carefully choosing where and with whom we spend our time. We can't stay home forever, but we *can* be aware of our constantly changing moods, which are a normal aspect of mourning.

**AFFIRMATION: I am on solid ground even if I feel shaky.**



*You were my North, my South, my East, my West.*

*My workaday week, my Sunday rest.*

—W. H. AUDEN, "FUNERAL BLUES"

These words, included in the funeral service in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, speak volumes about the enormity of our loss.

In many ways our mate was our world. He was our compass, our globe, the map upon which we fashioned our direction and destination.

He was there when we awoke and upon our lying down, an ever-present part of our daily existence, our playmate and companion for our moments of pleasure and rest.

The sun will rise, the moon will set. We will go to work, we will find our rest, but without him the world will be a bit smaller, a little harder to navigate.

**AFFIRMATION: You meant the world to me.**

## REGRET



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MONTH TWO

DAY SEVEN

*Finally, on the fourth of November, when those he loved had left the room just for a moment, Morrie stopped breathing. And he was gone. I believe he died this way on purpose.*

—MITCH ALBOM, *Tuesdays with Morrie*

If we weren't at our beloved's bedside, we may be angry at the hospital for failing to notify us in time, or angry at ourselves for having gone to the hospital dining room after hours of sitting vigil and having to be summoned just after the fact. We may worry that he suffered more because we weren't there; we may castigate ourselves for failing him when he needed us most.

We can't rewind the tape, we can't reverse the circumstances. We can, however, remember all the minutes, hours, days, and weeks we were heroically at his side, all the times we comforted him, advocated on his behalf, held his hand until the moment of death.

**AFFIRMATION: I was there when it mattered.**



## PERSONAL BELONGINGS

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MONTH FIVE

DAY SIXTEEN

*I have not moved the eyeglasses from the table next to our bed.*

—RUTH COUGHLIN

Some widows leave everything exactly as it was: the loose change in his wallet, his pills on the bathroom counter, the robe he left draped over a chair the last time he was home from the hospital. It can be deeply comforting to surround ourselves with his personal items for a while, as a way of holding him close.

Other women find it extremely healing to carefully put away their spouse's belongings, even rearranging their bedroom to make it more comfortable in the present. Either way is right if it's right for you. As long as leaving things as they are isn't a way of remaining paralyzed in pain, make each symbolic move as you're emotionally ready for it.

**AFFIRMATION: I will let go of my beloved at my own pace.**



Healing doesn't mean we stop missing him. Recovering from the shock of his death doesn't mean we don't pine for all the little things that made our life together comfortable and special. Even though we're getting more used to his absence, even though we're finding more moments of happiness in our lives, and even though we have other people to support us, some things are just irreplaceable. Today, write your husband a note about the things that only he could give you and that you may still miss.

My dearest \_\_\_\_\_,

I want to tell you all the things I miss about you...

## EVERYDAY LIFE

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MONTH SEVEN

DAY ONE

*It is the peculiar nature of the world to go on spinning  
no matter what sort of heartbreak is happening.*

—SUE MONK KIDD, *The Secret Life of Bees*

In the immediate hours and days following his death, we exist in an altered reality. Everything has changed, yet nothing is different. People carry on as if it's business as usual—going to work, talking on their cell phones, making plans for the weekend, as if there's something to look forward to, which, in and of itself is an idea too bizarre to wrap our brain around.

We don't necessarily resent the fact that life goes on—if anything, our day-to-day responsibilities keep us grounded in the midst of the craziness. However surreal it seems right now, as we *slowly* re-enter and resume our routines, life will make more sense and we will find our footing.

**AFFIRMATION: I am reassured by the small details of everyday life.**



## AFTERWORLD

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MONTH ELEVEN

DAY EIGHTEEN

*Let us remember that there is a better world, in which  
it is all day, a day that stretches for eternity.*

—MILTON STEINBERG

Those of us who are religiously inclined may take comfort in the concept of an afterworld—an eternal resting place in which there is no suffering, only abundant love and serenity.

If we reject—or simply can't conceive of—an afterworld, we may imagine our mate permanently asleep or unconscious, which in its own way represents eternal peace and an absence of pain.

Whether we imagine opulent feasts and angels' serenades or draw a blank, we can take comfort in knowing that our beloved is forever free of earthly tribulations and physical disease, which may have been constant companions leading up to his death. Perhaps there is a better world beyond; perhaps there is only the one in which we mortals reside. But either way our beloved is finally out of pain.

**AFFIRMATION:** *May you rest in peace.*



*The last person I slept with was my husband, and that was ten months and a hundred cartons of peanut-butter cup ice-cream ago. During my last life. The one that was supposed to be my only life. Ethan, my only love.*

—LOLLY WINSTON

If we're open to dating, when is it appropriate and how will we ever meet someone with even a fraction of the chemistry we shared with our mate and even if that's there that doesn't mean we'll have anything to talk about, which brings up the question of how much should we talk about our dead husband, which might chase the new guy away, but then again that will take care of the I-can't-imagine-sleeping-with-someone-else issue and if I do I'll feel horribly guilty and I'll ruin my kids' lives and I probably shouldn't even tell my best friends because they probably won't approve even if they say they understand because even I don't understand how I'm supposed to act on a first date when the last thing I ever wanted was to be single/widowed and if that's not enough, what in God's name should I wear?

**AFFIRMATION: It's just a date.**



## GOOD-BYES

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MONTH EIGHT

DAY TWO

*Thus we live, forever taking leave.*  
—RAINER MARIA RILKE, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Our awareness of impermanence has been enhanced by our loss. Now when we bid farewell to friends and acquaintances after spending time together, we realize there are no guarantees of coming back together in the morning light. We've learned that everything can—and will—be taken from us, that partings are in integral part of life, that reunions mustn't be taken for granted.

And so we say our good-byes with greater care, taking an extra moment for a hug, a warm word of encouragement, a prayer for safekeeping as our loved ones go their separate ways. We remember to say, "Be well," or "I love you"—words that come from having lived through more days than we can count, wishing we had another chance to say good-bye, in just the right way, just one more time.

**AFFIRMATION:** *Until we meet again.*



## LIFE-CYCLE CELEBRATIONS

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MONTH SIX

DAY TWENTY

*My daughter's wedding was one of the hardest days of my life.*

—RITA W.

Finding a way to get through happy occasions—especially those related to shared passages—remains one of the most bittersweet challenges of widowhood.

Celebrating our children's milestones in especially difficult. The one person uniquely capable of sharing and appreciating our joy is absent. We sit alone at our son's college graduation, bursting with pride, wanting to grasp his father's hand. Our hearts ache as we watch our daughter walk down the aisle on the arm of someone other than her dad. We hold our first grandchild, wishing desperately his grandfather could have lived to see this day.

Our joy is mixed with sorrow, and that's just the way it should be. These moments, though bittersweet, remind us of the joy our partnership with our husband brought to us. Even though our mate isn't here to share this experience, this moment allows me to appreciate him again.

**AFFIRMATION: I wish he were here.**



So many people have offered their condolences, sharing how highly they thought of your mate. You feel proud. You wish he could know what a lasting impact he's made.

He can. In the following space, write a letter telling him what a difference he's made and how very many people think the world of him.

My dearest \_\_\_\_\_ ,

These are some of the wonderful things people have said about you:...



*Now that you live here in my chest  
anywhere we sit is a mountaintop.*

—RUMI

And then, one day, out of nowhere we feel his presence. We fall to our knees in awe, and in that moment we are profoundly aware that, yes, he is no longer sitting across the dining room table or paying the bills or lying next to us in bed, and yes, he is anywhere and everywhere if we know how to find him.

We find him in the special place that evokes his essence and makes him feel so near, so dear, so real that we could weep for pleasure and for pain. Beneath the willow tree where we first met. Lying on our back, looking at the stars. The corner of our living room where we light a candle and listen to music.

What brings us closest to ourselves is what brings him closer to us.

**AFFIRMATION: I feel you beside me.**



## LETTING GO

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MONTH TWELVE

DAY FOUR

*Little by little you are slipping away from me.*

—JILL TRUMAN

We are torn between hanging on and letting go, between wanting time to stand still so that we can remain intensely connected to our love and our loss, and wanting to free ourselves to move on and rebuild our lives.

At first we fiercely resist any mention of tomorrow—and all the tomorrows without him—because each one is an assault on our aching hearts. But with the passage of time we begin lovingly to loosen our grasp.

Ultimately healing means loving him—and ourselves—enough to relinquish our hold. Our beloved slowly slips away, little by little, like the last luminous rays of twilight before the setting sun as we stare into the darkened sky.

And each glorious sunrise beckons us to greet the new day, facing the future as yesterday slowly fades into the distance.

**AFFIRMATION:** Slip away from me slowly, my love.